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HOW THE GAME FOUND ITS COOL
Why Are Smart People So Stupid Right Now?
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(AND A LOVE LETTER TO THE WORST)
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A GATHERING FORCE

WHEN I WAS A KID, I SPENT THE FIRST WEEKend of August each year at a reunion for my mother's side of the family, built around a golf tournament they created called the Schmitz Open. (Schmitz is my mom's maiden name.) The tradition had started in 1978 in Chicago, then the family seat, as an excuse for my six uncles and two great-uncles, their cousins, various in-laws, and close friends to get together and mess around on the golf course. They even made T-shirts—yellow, with fuzzy letters that read SCHMITZ OPEN and an ironed-on cartoon of a guy whacking a ball.

By the eighties, the reunion had drifted west, to the *original* family seat: the heartland of Iowa, where my mom's brother Jim and his wife, Marla, lived. Uncle Jim and Aunt Marla owned a big house near a golf course, and they didn't have the heart to say no to hosting dozens of Schmitzes, who had a tendency to get rowdy. According to family lore, at least one course had politely but firmly asked the Schmitzes never to return.

Not everyone played. My dad is not a golfer. In an act of what I suppose was rebellion, I took to the game when I was young. I wasn't very good, nor did I love to play. What I loved was hanging out with uncles and cousins and second cousins twice removed and family friends whom I'd always treated as blood relatives, and who might as well have been for those few long summer days each year. They were serious golfers, and I was not. But I learned at a young age that the game is a gathering force for pranks and off-color jokes, for enjoying cold beers and slow-burning cigars; that golf is an opportunity to spend time in the sun with the people you love, and with all of life's bullshit somewhere else.

A couple years ago, golf was considered an ailing sport. Few young people were taking it up. The media was readying its obituary for the game. Today, golf is in the midst of a great awakening. Thanks to a glut of new players, the 560-year-old sport has been imbued with a punk-rock spirit—albeit one in which the punks also replace their divots. To celebrate, we have fourteen pages, starting on page 60, on what we're calling the golfaissance. Led by deputy editor Ben Boskovich, Esquire's resident golfer, we prove that the game is far from dead. In fact, it's back in a big way. Assistant editor Brady Langmann profiles former NFL quarterback Johnny Manziel, who's now on a quest to become a pro golfer. Kamaiu Johnson, one of the few Black professional golfers today, tells us how the game saved his life. Scotty Cameron, who crafts the world's most coveted putters, gets downright philosophical with editor at large Daniel Dumas. Even golf's fashion has been disrupted. Erik Anders Lang, founder of Random Golf Club and a proselytizer for the sport, models the most stylish golf apparel along with a few friends in Malibu, California. If the old guard embraces these tectonic shifts—the new energy, the diversity, the clothes (even the hoodies!)—the game just might thrive for years to come.

As for me, I stopped playing when I left for college. And in the past two decades, I've been to fewer Schmitz Opens than I care to admit. Commitments. Geography. You get it. But etched onto my brain is the smell of cigar smoke and beer caught in the high-summer humidity, and with it the feeling of being with the people I love. I miss that. I didn't *know* how much I missed it. But working on this issue has inspired me to get back to the green to experience the real thing. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to brush up on my swing for the next Schmitz Open. **—Michael Sebastian**

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FROM THE ESQUIRE POLITICS DESK: JACK HOLMES

the *forbidden* question

IN APRIL, THE CIA'S TWITTER ACCOUNT REMINISCED ABOUT THE TIME THE United States supplied Afghan guerrillas with Stinger missiles. That was back in the go-go 1980s, when the U.S. national-security establishment was determined to ensure the Soviets, who had invaded Afghanistan, experienced "their own Vietnam." By 1989, the CIA website crows, "the Soviet Union had concluded that the fight was not worth the cost and withdrew from the country."

The Soviets were in Afghanistan for ten years. The United States has been there for 20. When the U.S. invaded following the attacks of September 11, the Taliban was in control. As President Joe Biden announces plans to withdraw by September 11, 2021—an admission, witting or not, of the arbitrariness of it all—the Taliban rules large swaths of the country. It's hard to imagine it will control less when we leave. And we will have to leave. Like the Soviets, and like ourselves in our own Vietnam, we have lost—or at least realized we cannot win.

After two decades, what do we have to show for the bombs and the bullets, the blood and tears and treasure spilled in the sand and rock? By asking the question, you risk dishonoring the sacrifice of the people who died in the fight, and the others who returned home unable to sleep through the night or play with their kids in the backyard. But it is our duty to ask, if only to ensure no more are asked to do the same. So far, we've lost more than 7,000 soldiers in our post-9/11 wars. We may never know the extent of the injuries, though the official tally is more than 52,000. The Costs of War project from Brown University determined that at least 335,000 civilians have been killed. At least 21 million Afghan, Iraqi, Pakistani, and Syrian people are living as refugees. There are more terror groups active now than when we started, and all it's cost us is $6.4 trillion.

We cannot keep this up out of some sunk cost accrued from mistakes already made. Because we are making the same mistakes all over the world. According to Costs of War, the United States is involved in some form of counterterrorism operations in 85 different countries. We've had troops on the ground training local forces or engaged in combat in Mali, Kenya, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Somalia, Niger, Kazakhstan. We have drones operating over large sections of the Middle East, and Special Forces operating all over Africa.

"We introduced a war-paradigm approach for dealing with the problem of terrorism, which is not necessarily effective," Stephanie Savell, codirector of the Costs of War project, told me. Historically, treating terrorism as a policing problem, or even negotiating with terror groups, has been more successful. "Nonetheless," she added, "the U.S. has this global war on terror."

Whether you find it absurd to wage war on a tactic, or you find all this to be another monstrous expression of the American imperial impulse, or you've just been conscious for the past 20 years, you are likely ready to admit that the United States dropping bombs and shooting bullets has not solved a problem in a long time. When the smoke clears, there are always new enemies. For much of these past two decades, bullets and bombs were the default prescription. At the Bush-era peak, criticizing the Iraq War was transfigured into an attack on the Troops and America itself. In reality, demanding concrete justifications for waging war was always the patriotic position—and our duty to the Troops as well. Anti-war types were cast as hopelessly naive, unable to grasp the grim facts of life in the post-9/11 world. Now it's a position of cold rationality.

It's too late to undo all we've done, but it's just the right time for the Biden administration to commit itself to avoiding the use of force in all contexts except when it is unavoidable. Call it the Peace Doctrine, but stop with the bombs, please. That includes drones, and giving our friends bombs to drop, too. Congress should revoke the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force and reclaim its constitutional prerogative to declare war. If we can thank Donald Trump for one thing, it isn't actually dropping fewer bombs; it's that he made staying out of other countries' affairs a viable position on the Right, too. Oh, and those Afghan guerrillas to whom we gave those Stingers back in Reagan's day? The CIA tweet happily mentions they were known as the mujahideen, who counted Osama bin Laden as a top supporter. When the Soviets departed, he was left as a kind of warlord. All these years later, we're still handing out weapons to people in places we do not understand, with consequences we cannot possibly foresee.

U.S. troops awaiting the evacuation of a fallen comrade in the Korangal Valley, Afghanistan, October 2007.

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FROM THE EDITORS OF

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A GOLDEN AGE OF STUPIDITY_THE SOUNDTRACK OF THE SUMMER_A FILM CRITIC'S MOVIE-NIGHT SCARES_ KILL YOUR HOUSEPLANTS_LESSONS FROM THE STAGE

GETTY IMAGES (BRAIN, GRENADE)

THE RISE OF ELEVATED STUPIDITY

America's HOT-TAKE ECONOMY has created a kind of smart that is indistinguishable from stupid. These days we're soaking in it.

by DAVE HOLMES

Ben Shapiro, Elevated Stupidity in human form.

APPROPRIATELY, THE MOMENT THAT DEFINES AMER-ica in 2021 took place on *The Real World Homecoming: New York*. In a reboot of their 1992 conversations about race, the reunited loftmates agree that everything Kevin Powell said back then about his lived experience, the words that got him labeled an Angry Black Man, is now the accepted truth of Black life in America. Even Kevin's old sparring partner Becky Blasband seems to admit systemic racism is real. But here's where things stop being polite and start getting culturally significant: Becky quickly adds that she does not contribute to systemic racism because she was involved in an Afro-Brazilian dance class, wherein she "lost her skin color." In other words, Becky—who by now has spent full episodes talking about her NYU education, her brilliant psychotherapist father, and her decades studying under a Russian theoretical physicist and healer—declares herself exempt from racism because she really crushed Cardio Capoeira at the Soho Equinox. She says this out loud, into a microphone, in front of cameras that are capturing footage. Yes, it is hilarious. But the incident is also revealing: A person can present their ideas with such eloquence and erudition that they fool themselves into thinking those ideas are not dumb. This is a kind of smart that is indistinguishable from stupid. It is Elevated Stupidity, and we're soaking in it.

Stupidity is saying two plus two equals five. Elevated Stupidity is doing the same thing, except you invoke Pythagoras, decry cancel culture when someone corrects you, then get a seven-figure book deal and a speaking tour out of it. Elevated Stupidity has permeated all facets of life—reality TV, social media, Congress, your group chat, and your softball team. Elevated Stupidity stems from the idea that being good at arguing is the same thing as being correct. That rhetorical skill—or at least a degree of big debate-club energy sufficient to wear out one's opponent—is the equivalent of intelligence. If being a good arguer is the same as being smart or correct, then do you know who is the smartest, correct-est person in history? Every Scientologist.

Dan Patrick, grandma sacrificer.

Elevated Stupidity is as old as recorded history. The Old Testament book of Proverbs cautions, "Don't answer the foolish arguments of fools, or you will become as foolish as they are," and says, "A proverb in the mouth of a fool is like a thorny branch brandished by a drunk." Elevated Stupidity was easy to identify and, like a thorny branch compared with an assault rifle, much easier to dodge. Today it's unavoidable. Why? We live in the Hot-Take Economy, with three major news-yelling networks and a full bench of second-stringers. There are eight podcasts for every man, woman, and child on earth and too many web publications to count. The machine needs fuel, and the cheapest option is consistently the Idea Nobody's Heard Yet. Express a fresh idea for the first time and it might juice up your YouTube subscriber numbers, get you on *Joe Rogan*, put your name in people's mouths. But cheap fuel is dirty fuel. Sometimes the reason an idea has not been expressed publicly before is that it's *bad*.

Sometimes the idea is "As a senior citizen, are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for your children and grandchildren? And if that's the exchange, I'm all in," like Texas lieutenant governor Dan Patrick said on *Tucker Carlson* in the early days of Covid. You might be a serious person with a serious haircut, saying on live television what boils down to "Feed the Covid monster enough grandmas and he'll go back to sleep."

Elevated Stupidity is Zack Smith of the Heritage Foundation testifying against D. C. statehood by saying its residents already have outsize political influence due to government officials driving past their yard signs. It is Katharine Gorka, director of the Feulner Institute's Center for Civil Society and the American Dialogue, worrying in The Federalist that liberals will cancel *Ted Lasso* because its characters practice the conservative virtues of "kindness" and "hard work."

It is Ben Shapiro. All day long.

There are many voices of Elevated Stupidity but only one face, and fittingly, it is an emoji: the smug thinky guy. His round yellow face is contorted into a rictus of Deep Thought, resting on a disembodied thumb and forefinger. *Let me see if I have this right,* that little asshole is thinking, right next to the dumbest thoughts you've ever read. "Let me play devil's advocate here," he says, failing to notice that Satan is pretty well defended these days. The thinky guy shows up in a high percentage of tweets from Charlie Kirk, a 27-year-old conservative activist and radio host, and I don't know whom to feel worse for.

WE FALL PREY TO ELEVATED STUPIDITY BECAUSE we're tired. Our best selves tell us to challenge our existing biases, to read the works of people whose experiences do not match our own, to engage with fresh perspectives. But you've met us, and you know we're not going to do that. We're overwhelmed and inundated with content, and as human beings, we're desperate to do the minimum amount of research that allows us to keep on believing what already makes us feel good about ourselves. So we subcontract the reading and the

Esquire Endorsement

Famous living Americans who *should* start a podcast: Elliott Gould, Carol Burnett, Angela Bassett, Kermit the Frog.

THERE ARE MANY VOICES

THIS PAGE: GETTY IMAGES (SHAPIRO). ANA RAMIREZ/TNS/NEWSCOM (PATRICK). OPPOSITE: GETTY IMAGES (KIRK). THEO WARGO/GETTY IMAGES (PAGLIA).

thought. We find a person with the weary mien and broad vocabulary of someone who must have gone to all the trouble of thinking independently, and when they reach the conclusion we started with, we say, "See?" Unfortunately, too often that means delegating your serious thought to an exhausted racist with a thesaurus.

Imagine for a moment that you're a dick. Say you're not happy with the results of the last election. You're uneasy about demographic shifts in America. You're not storm-the-Capitol angry, or at least you don't have the right Carhartt jacket for it, but you're not getting your way. Something must be done. So you click on that *National Review* link to an essay titled "Why Not Fewer Voters?" You see that the writer employs the Latin phrase *ceteris paribus* in the first paragraph, you Google it to see which perfectly good English words he could have used, and you nod your head yes. Yes, we've got a live one here. You read through the part where he drops the expression "unqualified voters" like it's a thing people say and he wonders why we're more comfortable with them than we would be with unlicensed doctors. You think, *Okay, that's a stretch,* but then he uses the word *plebiscite* instead of "public vote" a couple paragraphs later, so you're lulled back into thinking he's making a valid point. You get all the way through it, to the part where he says maybe we need fewer but more serious voters, and you agree, and you share it. Way to go! You're an American patriot rooting against your own system of government.

When draped in our American need to self-mythologize and our Puritan ideal of sacrifice, Elevated Stupidity can become dangerous. Think about the anti-mask protests in the past year, all those people scribbling founding-father quotes onto Don't Tread on Me signs in service of an idea that is essentially "Please come sneeze in my mouth." Think of the hours after the George Floyd verdict was announced, when all Nancy Pelosi had to do to hit the correct tone was nothing. Instead, she thanked Floyd for "sacrificing your life for justice," as though he'd had a say in it. Then the Speaker of the House thanked him "for being there to call out to your mom, how heartbreaking was that," like it was a particularly hard-hitting moment from Hometown Week on *The Bachelor*. Elevated Stupidity and self-righteousness are a volatile mixture. But, like, the kind that Flubber was.

Even the undeniably smart have moments of Elevated Stupidity. In a single sentence, Camille Paglia can make me feel as if I've never read a book in my life. She is wise and canny; she also calls climate change "a sentimental myth" that can only be believed if we don't "understand the grandeur and the power of nature." So don't sweat your emissions, Paglia seems to say; the world is very large. Just throw your lit cigarette butt anywhere; this hotel has a high atrium.

Take any recent argument against the rights of trans people. Strip away the feints at empathy, dumb down the big words, and what you are left with, roughly 100 percent of the time, is "But what if a boy puts on a wig and joins the girls' soccer team, and then they win state?" These arguments are written in real publications and said into real news-network cameras and spoken at real lecterns for hefty appearance fees. They are expressed by people with degrees, and books, and titles like Director of Freedom Studies at the American Dignity Consortium and Eagle Preserve. They seep into our culture because they have taken on an air of seriousness, of sobriety. You can almost forget they're also the plot of the 1992 Rodney Dangerfield/Jackée Harry family comedy *Ladybugs*.

Charlie Kirk, the thinky-guy emoji personified.

Camille Paglia. Even the brilliant fall victim to Elevated Stupidity.

Elevated Stupidity works. Grab a few big words off the top shelf and glibly reference Marxism and you can fool people into thinking you have something worthwhile to say. (See: Milo Yiannopoulos.) You may not last long—put a mortarboard on a pig and it's still a pig—but you can make the whole world a tiny bit dumber in the time you have. (See also: Milo Yiannopoulos.)

As we live our lives ever more publicly, we have come to prioritize arguing—the flashy, viral, *gotcha* kind—over learning. Elevated Stupidity is the natural result: the beautiful, eloquent defense of opinions left over, unchallenged, from when you were six. It is pervasive among those who are supposed to be smarter than me—the people we've lifted to the role of public intellectual. Turns out, they're exactly as smart as I am.

I'm still trying to imagine anything more terrifying.🤔

OF ELEVATED STUPIDITY BUT ONLY ONE FACE: THE SMUG THINKY EMOJI.

THE sound OF summer '21

Clockwise from top: DJ Maphorisa, Moonchild Sanelly, Lady Du, and Cassper Nyovest.

by MATT MILLER

THE SONG OF THE SUMMER IS A PERENnial debate among music journalists that culminates with the naming of one or more tracks that captured the mood of a couple sizzling months. In other words, the songs you're sick of hearing by Labor Day. It's too early to tell which one will dominate this complicated summer, but no other genre captures the pent-up frustration and coming bacchanalia like amapiano.

Pronounced *a-mah-piano,* it's a South African subgenre of deep house with elements of jazz and lounge music. Sexy and hypnotic, with blooming rhythms and '90s-era bass lines, the music is perfect for long hours at the club. The dance grooves also go down easy enough to serve as the soundtrack to your backyard barbecues. "Amapiano is, first of all, purely for dancing," says Phiona Okumu, Spotify's head of music for sub-Saharan Africa. "It's carefree in almost a rebellious way."

Born in the townships of South Africa in the mid-2010s, the style has produced a slate of artists racking up millions of streams on Spotify and YouTube. Among them: Moonchild Sanelly, Kabza De Small, DJ Maphorisa, and Cassper Nyovest. (A good place to start is the "Amapiano Grooves" playlist on Spotify.) "If you don't have a song in amapiano, you basically don't exist in this culture right now," says Moonchild Sanelly, who collaborated with Beyoncé on "My Power."

Some of the biggest musicians in the world are taking notice. Beyoncé. Usher, who danced on his Instagram to "Sponono," a track from Kabza De Small. Drake collaborated with DJ Maphorisa. GoldLink, Disclosure, and Alicia Keys have all taken an interest in Afrobeats. "My music has reached countries I never even imagined would play and love the sound," says songwriter, DJ, and vocalist Lady Du. "As an artist who came from nothing, I want to tell a story about our African roots and how important it is to keep the African spirit in our songs."

The genre is already catching on in Europe and the U. S., trending to be the next sound to take over global pop and hip-hop, as K-pop and Latin music have in the past decade. Although summer '21 will mark its arrival on your Bluetooth speakers, the music of amapiano is rich enough to remain on your playlists well beyond these few hot months.

THE BIG SUMMER READS

The Sensation-Maker

The Other Black Girl

BY ZAKIYA DALILA HARRIS

Get Out meets *The Devil Wears Prada* in the summer's buzziest debut, a blistering work of auto-fiction about Nella, the lone Black employee at Wagner Books. The arrival of Hazel, another Black assistant, seems to answer Nella's prayers—but Hazel isn't an ally. When Nella receives threatening anonymous notes demanding that she leave Wagner, she immediately suspects Hazel. The truth is far more sinister. In this powerful story of racism, privilege, and gatekeeping's damage to the Black psyche, Harris puts corporate America on blast.

The Nail-Biter

Falling

BY T. J. NEWMAN

Written by a former flight attendant while she worked red-eyes, this bruising thriller unfolds over the course of one transcontinental flight. When the pilot's family is kidnapped, he has a choice: crash the plane to save his loved ones or deliver his 148 passengers and crew safely and let his family die. With a terrorist holding the plane captive, the pilot and his resourceful crew must race to do the impossible. Expect major anxiety as it barrels to a stunning conclusion.

The Eye-Opener

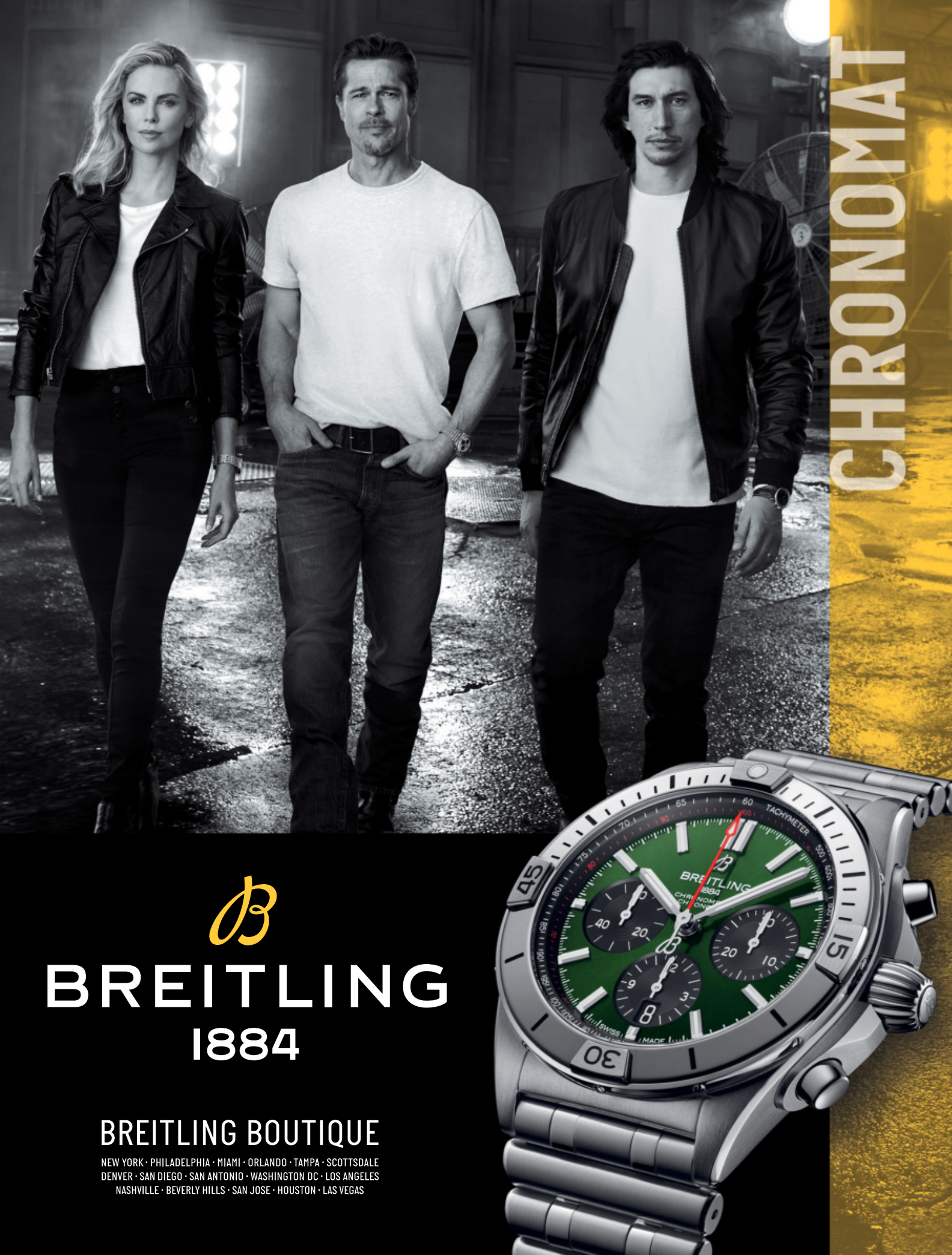
How the Word Is Passed

BY CLINT SMITH

The summer's most visionary work of nonfiction is this radical reckoning with slavery, as represented in the nation's monuments, plantations, and landmarks. As he tours the country, Smith observes the wounds of slavery hiding in plain sight. He considers how the darkest chapter of our nation's past has been sanitized for public consumption and explores how slavery has shaped our collective history—and how we might hope for a more truthful collective future.

—ADRIENNE WESTENFELD

JONATHANSLOANE/GETTY IMAGES (RECORD PLAYER). COURTESY COLUMBIA RECORDS UK (DJ MAPHORISA). PHATSTOKI (MOONCHILD SANELLY). SFUNDO MAJOZI (LADY DU). AARON J. THORNTON/GETTY IMAGES (CASSPER NYOVEST).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SCAN TO SHOP

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Angular mid-century modern furnishings are a stylish way to save and delineate space. A light color softens the mood.

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Progressive Furniture, Augustine 25 in. Sepia Brown C-Table; SKU: #312375644

LR Resources, Homestead Charcoal and Beige Geometric Hypoallergenic Polyester 20 in. x 20 in. Throw Pillow; SKU: #304956910

DESKTOP BACKGROUND

A sleek workstation with built-in storage keeps your multiuse space calm and clutter-free.

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StyleWell, 42 in. Donnelly Black Metal and Haze Wood Finish Writing Desk with 2 Drawers; SKU: #309756400

Home Decorators Collection, 42 in. Brown 2-Drawer Writing Desk with Built-In Storage; SKU: #309807979

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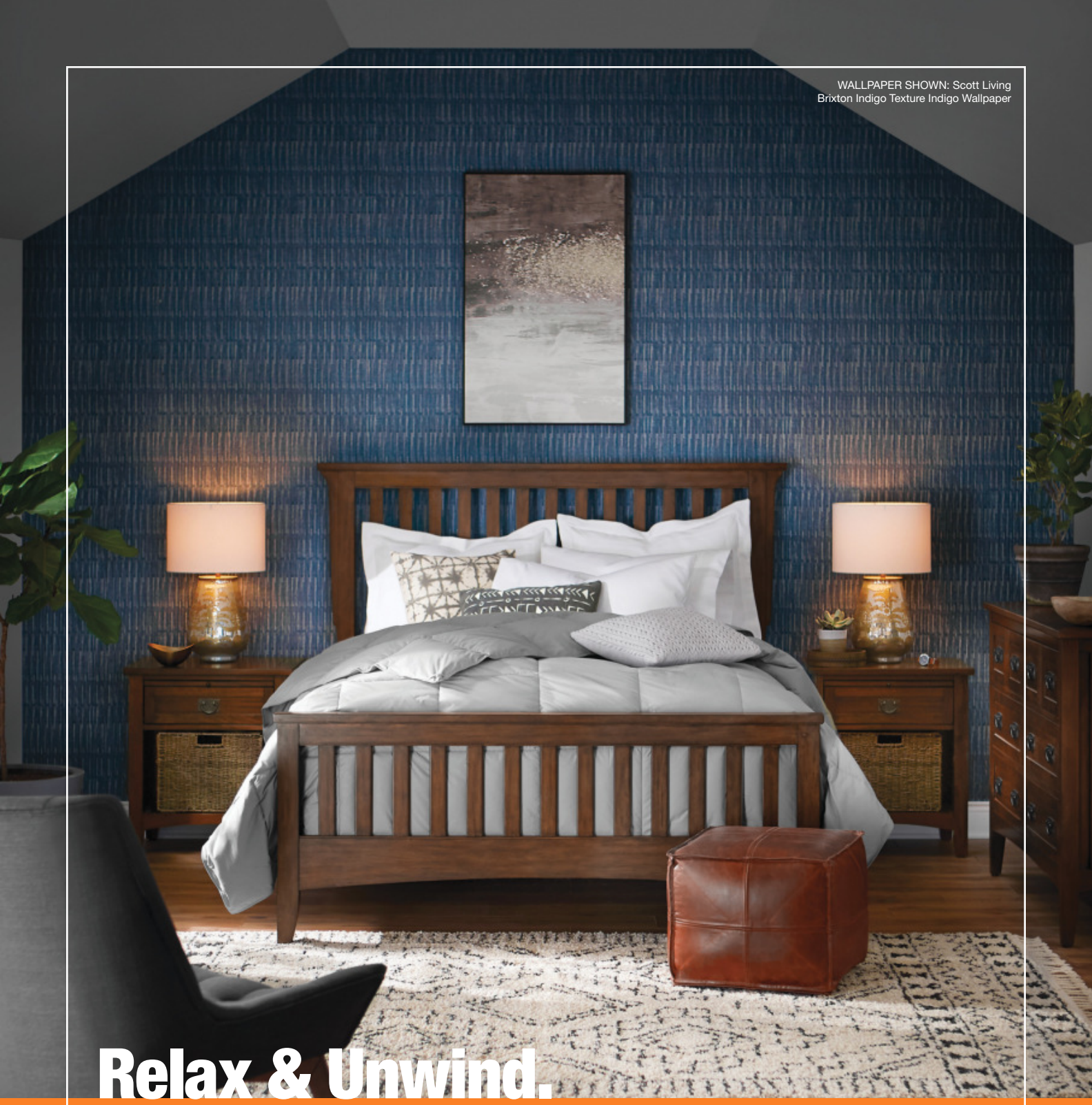
Adesso, Lewis 11.5 in. Black Table Lamp; SKU: #305501756

StyleCraft, Retro 21.6 in. Matte Black Brass Table Lamp; SKU: #311291688



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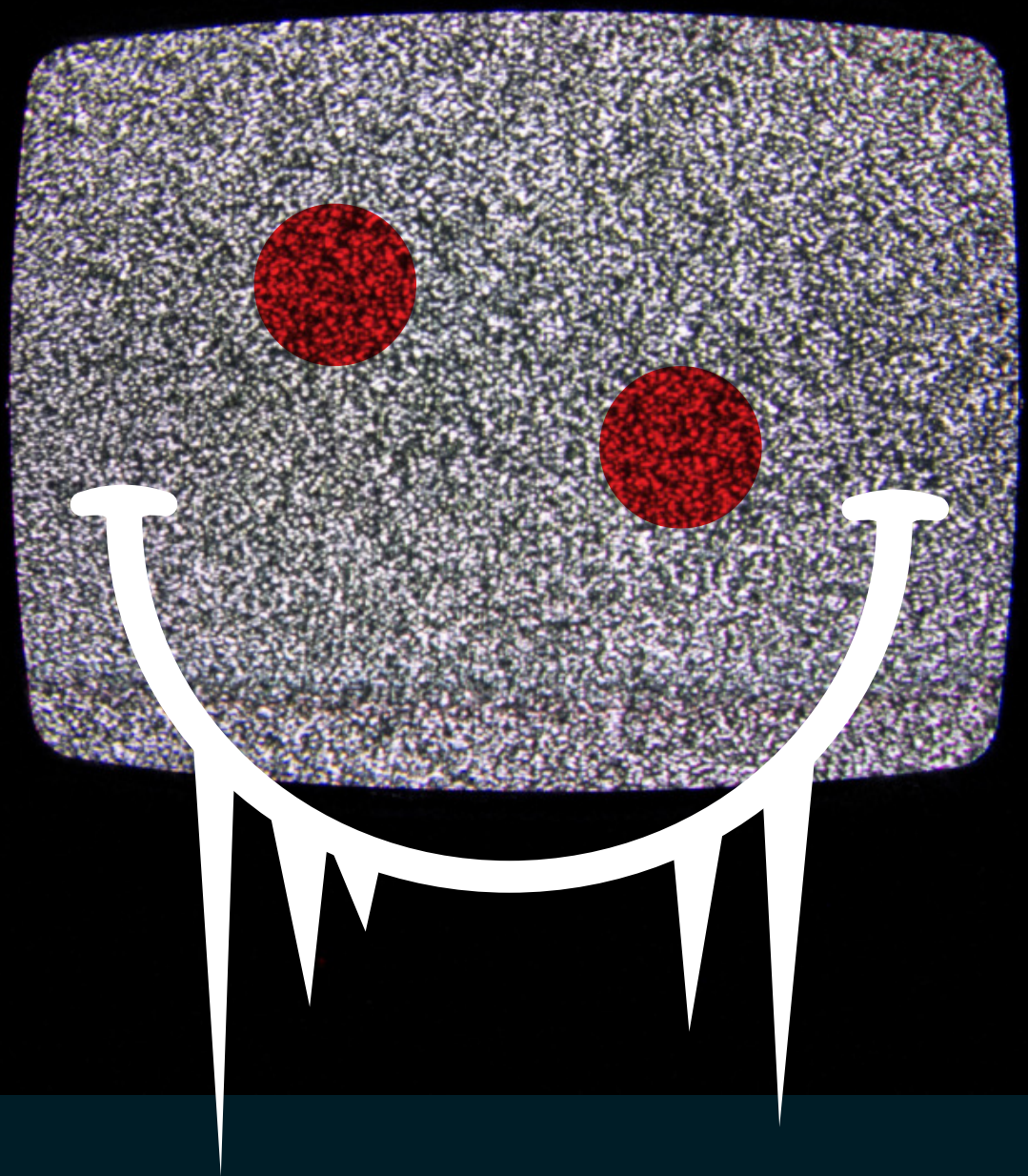
NIGHTMARE ON MAIN STREET

Being a father of young sons right now means fretting more about plenty—like what to pick on MOVIE NIGHT. They're getting too big for the baby stuff, but are they really ready for the thrills of a true horror classic?



KRISTOPHER_K/ISTOCKPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES (TV SCREEN)

BY CHRIS NASHAWATY

DO YOU REMEMBER THE FIRST MOVIE THAT scared the holy living shit out of you? Of course you do. I certainly remember mine. And it's been haunting me lately because . . . well, because I'm worried about being a terrible father. Let me explain.

One Saturday afternoon not long ago, I was sitting on the couch in our suburban New England home with my twin seven-year-old sons. The morning snow that we had woken up to was turning into bleak afternoon slush and sleet, and our plans to go sledding were dashed. Suddenly we were stuck inside with hours to kill before dinner, bath, and bedtime. So we all decided the best thing to do would be to whip up some hot chocolate, commit to hibernating in our pj's, and throw on a movie. Sounds idyllic, right?

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Wrong. Pretty quickly it became clear that our ideas of the perfect cozy shut-in movie couldn't be more different. It's not as if I were expecting them to suggest *Touch of Evil* or *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*–after all, they're seven. But when they tossed their top three picks at me, I felt like a deflating balloon. In descending order, they went like this: *The Boss Baby, The SpongeBob Movie,* and *Captain Underpants.* All three, I should point out, we'd already watched. Many times.

So I told them I thought we could do better. That we ought to try something they'd never seen before. Something we could all love. I started flipping through the cable guide and saw that *Gremlins* was just about to kick off on one of the lesser HBO channels. I hit record. Then I went into the kitchen to warm up three mugs of cocoa and told them to fasten their seat belts. They were about to witness a classic.

The first fifteen minutes zipped by. The boys thought the white-and-caramel-colored fuzzball, Gizmo, was adorable. They thought Corey Feldman was "weird," but in a funny way. And they were so intrigued by the onscreen dad's ominous set of rules for the care and feeding of a mogwai (no bright lights, keep them away from water, and whatever you do, don't feed them after midnight) that they made me rewind the scene over and over again as if they were taking notes in case they got one for Christmas.

That's when my wife walked into the room to retrieve her phone from the charger. She stopped and watched for a few minutes, rocking back and forth on her heels. She shot me a look.

"Do you think they're old enough for this?"

"Sure, why not?"

"It gets kind of . . . scary. Doesn't it?"

"Well, it's not exactly *Gremlins 2.* Hey, guys, do you think you can handle this?"

"Yesssss!!!"

"See, it'll be fine."

It wasn't fine. As we kept watching and Gizmo started sprouting evil hellspawn that went feral, I felt a tiny hand reaching for mine. Its squeeze was tighter than usual. The laughter took on a nervous edge, then it stopped completely. Foolishly, I pressed on.

Cut to 3:00 A.M. and there I was trying to talk the older of the two down from a full-blown, *Gremlins*-inspired nightmare. Being a dad means feeling like an asshole a thousand times a day. But this was different because I also felt guilty. At that ungodly hour of the morning, wiping my son's sweat-soaked hair back from his forehead and whispering that everything was going to be okay, I felt sure that this screwup would leave an indelible mark. I was trying to be a good dad. A cool dad. What had I done?

A FEW DAYS LATER, I WAS ON A ZOOM call with my five best friends from high school. We'd been doing this every Friday night since last March, when it became clear that we wouldn't be seeing one another in person for a while. Since then, it's become a ritual–a welcome chance to shoot the shit with the guys who know me better than anyone, share a long-distance cocktail or three, and air out what's been going on in our lives. We've been doing this in one form or another for the past three decades. But in recent years, the conversation has shifted. We still bullshit about stuff like the best concerts we've ever seen. We still toss around *Fletch* quotes and debate the Big Questions, such as: Has there ever been a better action-movie villain than *Die Hard*'s Hans Gruber? (The answer, of course, is no–although Richard Dawson's Killian in *The Running Man* is a close second.) But now we also talk about other stuff . . . dad stuff, like: Hey, is it okay to show my kids *The Mandalorian* or are there too many guns? What about *The Lord of the Rings?*

Sweet dreams, kids! *The Wizard of Oz;* Slugworth, the Slender Man of *Willy Wonka;* Quint meets the great white in *Jaws.*

I'm pretty sure my parents never worried about questions like these. I realize that growing up in the pre-helicopter era of the seventies and eighties was different. Parents worried less. Mine worried less than most. Don't get me wrong: I hope to do half as well raising my kids as they did. But let's just say they held a permissive attitude about the MPAA's rating system. To them, an "R" was taken about as seriously as the surgeon general's warning on one of their packs of Kent 100's.

When our family would go to the mall, my folks would drop me and my older brother off at the multiplex and buy us tickets to whatever the hell was playing, whether it was *Dog Day Afternoon* or *The Omen* or *Piranha*. On my sixth birthday, they took me to see *Jaws. Jaws*! For two hours, I sat there shaking, watching through trembling fingers. For the rest of that summer, I refused to go to the beach, swim in a pool, or take a bath. I was so terrified of a killer great white somehow managing to swim its way into our plumbing system that I could barely be talked into sitting on the toilet. You could say the movie was memorable for me.

But being a father is different now. For some reason, the stakes seem higher. We all live in fear of being judged and caught doing the wrong thing–of exposing our kids to stuff that won't only scare them but scar them. And I'm not sure it's for the best. I'm not saying you should sit your fourth grader down in front of *Total Recall* or *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre,* but as someone who squirmed through *Night of the Living Dead* at nine (and somehow miraculously survived to be a relatively well-adjusted adult), should I really be all that concerned that a show about Baby Yoda and a bounty hunter on Disney+ is going to harm them? Where do we draw the line between making our kids aware of the darker things in life and inflicting permanent damage?

So here's what I did: I decided to take baby steps, gently engaging in a parent-child ritual as old as *The Odyssey* and *Grimm's Fairy Tales.* I would hold their hands and we would face scary things together. I thought back to my earliest memory of being frightened at the movies. I didn't have to think very hard. It was *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory.* I must have been five at the time. No, I didn't flinch when the gluttonous Augustus Gloop was sucked up a tube after falling into the river of chocolate, and I wasn't freaked out by the trippy boat ride through the psychedelic tunnel where Gene Wilder seems to go off his nut. Rather, it was the creepy face of the confectionery spy Slugworth that gave me night terrors. Skeletally thin, he whispered into those little kids' ears like the Big Bad Wolf in creepy, Slender Man form, his every word a dark insinuation. He scared the living shit out of me.

So I put on *Wonka* one Sunday afternoon and watched it with my kids. Actually, *they* watched the movie. I watched *them,* paying close attention to their faces whenever Slugworth popped up onscreen. Neither reached out for my hand. In fact, when it was all over, they ran to the kitchen cabinet to see if we still had any leftover fun-size Kit Kats from Halloween.

I forged onward, pushing my two little Skinner-box subjects as far as my conscience would allow. They didn't have any problem with *Star Wars* or even the darker *Empire Strikes Back.* The flying monkeys from *The Wizard of Oz* didn't faze them a bit. We even made it through the first two thirds of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* without incident. (I turned it off before the Nazi-face-melting climax–I'm not a sociopath!) (continued on page 102)

AA FILM ARCHIVE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (*THE WIZARD OF OZ*). TCD/PROD.DB/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (*WILLY WONKA AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY*). SUNSET BOULEVARD/GETTY IMAGES (*JAWS*).

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Kill YOUR Houseplants

It's time to DITCH THE FICUS and go bold. Your inspiration? The 1980s.

BY KELLY STOUT

LOOK AROUND YOUR HOME. Locate the nearest plant. I know it's there. These days, it's illegal to live in a space without one. This wasn't always the case. Not long ago, your home lacked vegetation. Then you read that plants could give your bedroom a "refresh," so you bought a snake plant. You put a fern or a ficus in your living room. Before you knew it, your interior-decoration style had developed not through any cultivation of actual taste but through inertia alone—it became all about plants. The wealthiest among us have taken it to the next level by adding trophy trees, which, according to *The Wall Street Journal,* involves buying a fully grown oak from someone's backyard and dropping it on your interior patio.

We've come a long way from the snake plant.

How did this happen? Kyle Chayka, author of *The Longing for Less: Living With Minimalism,* dubbed the aesthetic phenomenon of personality-free locations that could exist anywhere "AirSpace." Think bright lighting, midcentury-modern furniture, and, yes, plants. This is not something to shoot for.

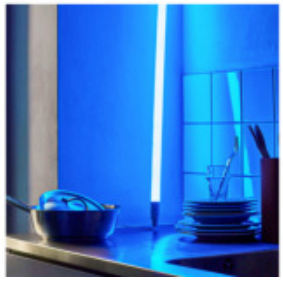
Bored of AirSpace, I started following Instagram accounts devoted to the interior design of the 1980s—some must-follows: @the_80s_interior, @80s_deco, @jpeg_fantasy—and noticed these spaces had so much more than plants. People in the '80s tried things. And not just Perrier and cocaine! They experimented with patterned coffee tables, red lampshades, neoclassical columns where they didn't belong. Sure, there were missteps (carpeted bathrooms come to mind), but everyone was having fun. AirSpace this was not. Sometime in the past 40 years, we abandoned the liveliness and kept only the plants.

Soon we will be able to venture into one another's homes for parties, and yours should feel like it belongs to someone who enjoys a good time. I'm not saying to go full Memphis—a style defined by vibrant colors and odd shapes; the most extreme version is Pee-wee's Playhouse—nor would I recommend the minimalism of Le Corbusier. But filling your apartment with plants equals a lack of effort. So what's the solution?

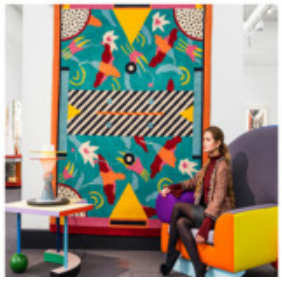
I asked Meg Gustafson, an avowed maximalist who runs @80s_deco, where to start. She loved midcentury modern ten years ago but believes that "tasteful is overrated" and "interior design should be funny." In other words, the opposite of AirSpace. Gustafson suggested a neon tube from Hay (us.hay.com), which you can get for $75. Too much? Try something in colorful laminate, like a waterfall console or coffee table. Her advice for the truly bold? "One oversize thing."

A plant in the corner of a well-lit room has become a symbol of taste but not a substitute for it. Plants can elevate your living room, but only by about one inch. Aim higher, and don't be afraid to make mistakes. You just survived a pandemic—go nuts! "A lot of Memphis didn't work," Gustafson reminded me, "and they didn't give a shit."

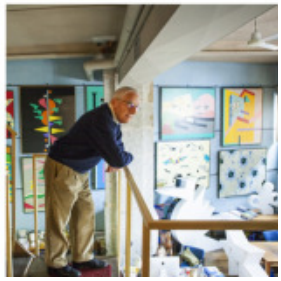
Your new muse: Memphis design of the 1980s.



This Dan Flavin–inspired tube from Hay is only $75.



Chair by Peter Shire; rug by Nathalie Du Pasquier.



Designer Alessandro Mendini knew bold.

PROP STYLING BY MIAKO KATOH (PLANT). VENTURELLI/GETTY IMAGES (MEMPHIS DESIGN). COURTESY HAY (NEON TUBE). STEPHEN CHUNG/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (CHAIR AND RUG). LEONARDO CENDAMO/GETTY IMAGES (MENDINI).

PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFFREY WESTBROOK

PLANT PROTEIN NUT

Pro Football Hall of Famer
Tony Gonzalez

PLANT PROTEIN NUT

Game Day Snack Hall of Famer
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After five decades on the stage, De Shields won a Tony for best actor in 2019, for his role as the Greek god Hermes in *Hadestown*.

Interview by KENIA MAZARIEGOS

André De Shields

75, ACTOR, *New York*

__**IN MY FIFTY-TWO YEARS** as a Black performer, the question I'm asked by casting directors more often than not is, "Can you sing and dance?" Well, yeah, because I grew up doing doo-wop under the street lamps in the drizzling rain with my brothers, went to house parties to learn the latest moves. I don't have formal training as a singer and dancer, but it's in my blood.

__**WE'VE BEEN TAUGHT** if you see something, say something. I believe if you know something, share something.

__**WHEN I WON THE TONY,** the first thing that came out of my mouth was "Is Baltimore in the house?" It was the first time I had a captive audience of millions; to speak to that many people from the living stage, I'd have to work for hundreds of years. This was my opportunity. And what I said was, "Baltimore, when I left you in 1964, I promised I would achieve certain heights so you would be proud to say, 'That's a native son.'"

__**FROM MY VERY FIRST** conscious thought as a young man, I knew I wanted to be an entertainer. That came from my parents. My mother wanted to dance, but that was not considered a career for a young colored woman born at the turn of the twentieth century. Similarly, my father, he wanted to sing, but his parents said, "That's not a responsible way to be a breadwinner." So my parents deferred their dreams.

__**I'M NINTH OF** eleven children, so I consider myself lucky number nine, because the dreams my parents deferred came true through me.

__**YOU HAVE TO** experience an epiphany. The dream is one thing. The epiphany is the legitimization of the dream. My epiphany was a film called *Cabin in the Sky.* It starred what was then probably every world-class Black star: Lena Horne, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Butterfly McQueen. It was the first time I had seen a reflection of me in a movie theater.

__**IF THE UNIVERSE** were homogenous, it would be the most boring experience. It's like a potluck. You don't want everybody to bring a salad. You want someone to bring their best fried chicken, someone to bring macaroni and cheese.

__**THERE IS NO ONE LIKE YOU,** there has never been anyone like you, and there shall never be anyone like you.

__**THE HIGH POINT** of my journey as an actor came in 1966. I was the first person in my family to go to college. When I arrived at Wilmington College, a drama teacher said, "Are you an actor?" I said, "That's what I want to be." He said, "Good, because I want to direct *A Raisin in the Sun* on campus, but there aren't enough Black actors." Long story short, I'm nineteen, and he cast me as Walter Lee Younger.

__**MY PARENTS**—who had cautioned me about becoming an entertainer, just as their parents had cautioned them—got on a bus in Baltimore and came to Ohio to see me perform for the first time, finally understanding I did have talent and there was reason to encourage me as opposed to caution me.

__**PLAYING** Walter Lee Younger was therapeutic. Walter is full of righteous rage because of the discrimination we've been talking about. I was able to get that anger, that bitterness, that sense of disappointment out of my system. It was a kind of healing.

__**THERE ARE TWO** venues where people come together for purposes of worship and communion, of having questions answered, crises resolved, burdens lifted. One is church; the other is theater.

__**THE BEST SONG** to sing in the shower? The Black national anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing." That always shifts my mood. Even when the mood starts off good, it just gets better.... *Let our rejoicing rise / high as the listening skies / let it resound loud as the rolling sea*... Now, is the mood better?

KENIA MAZARIEGOS IS A GRADUATE STUDENT AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY'S SCHOOL OF PROFESSIONAL STUDIES. A WASHINGTON, D.C., NATIVE, SHE PLANS TO PURSUE A CAREER IN BROADCAST JOURNALISM.

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This summer, steal your fits from the guys sipping spritzes by the tennis court. Country-club membership very much not required.

BY BEN BOSKOVICH

FROM LEFT: POLO ($546) AND SHORTS BY **AHLUWALIA;** SHOES ($170) BY **AIMÉ LEON DORE X TIMBERLAND;** SUNGLASSES ($161) BY **RAY-BAN;** SOCKS ($13) BY **AMERICAN TRENCH;** JACKET ($475) AND POLO ($195) BY **CASABLANCA;** SHORTS ($75) BY **LACOSTE;** CASABLANCA 327 SNEAKERS ($150) BY **NEW BALANCE;** HAT ($55) BY **AIMÉ LEON DORE;** SOCKS BY **JOCKEY.**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SACHA MARIC

IT'S PARTY TIME, PEOPLE. After a year spent in sweats, we're coming out of our cages and ready to live it the hell up. Since we're celebrating, isn't it high time you treated yourself to some of the finer things in life? Sip some Champagne. Spring for the shrimp cocktail. And when you're getting dressed, go ahead and channel your inner lazy rich boy. You know who I'm talking about: the kid who's home from [insert Ivy League institution here] for the summer and enjoying the fruits of his parents' labor—and their country-club membership to boot. His values might leave something to be desired, but his wardrobe should be your new style inspiration.

JACKET ($795), SWEATER ($298), SHIRT ($175), AND TROUSERS ($298) BY **ROWING BLAZERS;** LOAFERS ($995) BY **RALPH LAUREN;** HAT ($25) BY **'47,** LIDS.COM.

Sound dicey? I hear you. But this ain't your granddad's country-club uniform. Today's best chopped-and-screwed riffs on gin-and-tonic-friendly fashion are informed by everything from tennis and polo to streetwear and music. Think what would happen if you threw a golf pro, a downtown fashion kid, and a streetwear acolyte into a padded booth and plied them with fried clams and club sauce until they'd distilled the best of all their worlds into one off-kilter (and incredibly cool) vibe.

Functionally speaking, that means popping your collar (seriously!), tying that sweater around your shoulders as Carlton Banks taught you, going sockless, and embracing all the stripes, color blocking, and monochromatic offerings that brands like Polo Ralph Lauren, Casablanca, and Rowing Blazers have mastered. Then knock the stuffing out of things. Wear your chinos loose and louche or cropped and cuffed, or switch 'em out for elastic-waist camp shorts. Throw on some white socks with your loafers and maybe even toss a track jacket into the mix. Membership be damned, but "Yes, I will have another spritz, monsieur."

And what of our long-lost friend, the office? If your dress code at work is as lax as the postpandemic expectation of showing up at all, the only thing to do is put on your trusty blazer and trade your knockaround shoes for something with a little polish, and you'll be carrying that poolside essence to the Big Meeting.

Tear out this page and tape it to the inside of your closet door. Look at it first thing in the morning, close your eyes, and see yourself strolling the carpeted hallways of the club. That life is for you, man. Lord knows you've earned it.

STYLING: ALFONSO FERNÁNDEZ NAVAS. MODELS: IBBY SOW AND NGAWANG BONGPA/MARILYN NY. GROOMING: CAROLYN RILEY/DEFACTO. LOCATION: PLEASE SPACE.

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C'mon, Get Hippie

Tired of too-slick menswear? This summer's most exciting designers are taking a little DIY attitude—and a whole lotta love—to make something soulful.

BY JONATHAN EVANS

JACKET ($1,560), SHIRT ($460), AND TROUSERS ($2,100) BY **BODE.**

Remember arts-and-crafts time? You're eight years old and someone gives you a few crayons and a full bottle of Elmer's and suddenly you're not a child anymore; you're a creator. No one in the history of the universe has made a more compelling picture of a doggy than you. Good job, kiddo. But now Leonardo da freakin' Vinci is pulling up a chair next to you, grabbing a handful of Popsicle sticks, and building a fully functional helicopter. He's turning the humble into the highbrow (and cool as hell), and he's making it look easy.

That's kinda what's happening in fashion right now. While some brands are getting a little too slick (and, let's face it, a little too soulless), a swath of makers, including Bode, Savant, the Elder Statesman, and even Balenciaga, are lending a revitalized sense of personalization and craft to some of the hottest menswear on the market.

They're throwing it back to the arts-and-crafts table with purposely imperfect embellishment and embroidery, but they're also throwing it way back to ancient traditions like mended-and-patched Japanese boro cloth and newer ones like the innovative, artistic quilting developed in Gee's Bend, a remote Black community in Alabama, at the beginning of the 20th century. And they're bringing those vibes, plus a healthy dose of punkish DIY-ism, to everything from patch-covered bucket hats and colorful cardigans to beaded bracelets and belts.

It's not all one-of-one, made-by-hand stuff (though some pieces, such as Bode's much-beloved chore coats, really are singular works of art), but it's all connected by the feeling that it *could* be. You can run your hands over the beading and patchwork. You can see the seams and stitches. And if you squint hard enough, you can almost spot someone snapping on rubber bands to tie-dye that baseball shirt. Slick and sterile ain't the name of the game here. Instead, it's about stuff that shows you how it came together. Provenance, not mass production.

Sounds a little hippieish, right? Or maybe you'd prefer "cottagecore"? Well, you're not wrong. Which is why, if you're just dipping your toes into this particular part of the pool, you might want to start small. Drape a quilted coat over your trustiest T-shirt-and-jeans combo and see how you feel. Top off your go-to camp shirt and cropped chinos with a bucket hat, and maybe even add a bracelet if the mood strikes. Toss that baseball shirt over a tank top and let it flow in the breeze.

Want to up the stakes? Just start adding more. More patchwork, more tie-dye, more beads and embroidery and everything else. Once you've hit the point that feels good, stop. You'll know when it's right for you. After all, you're an artist. And if that doggy picture wasn't enough proof of your creative expertise, your new fit damn sure is.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SACHA MARIC

OPPOSITE: STYLING: ALFONSO FERNÁNDEZ NAVAS. MODEL: NGAWANG BONGPA/MARILYN NY. GROOMING: CAROLYN RILEY/DE FACTO. LOCATION: PLEASE SPACE. THIS PAGE: JEFFREY WESTBROOK. PROP STYLING: MIAKO KATOH.

CARDIGAN ($1,695) BY **THE ELDER STATESMAN,** MATCHESFASHION.COM.

BELTS ($165 EACH) BY **CAMP HERO.**

JACKET ($1,595) BY **STAN.**

HATS ($65 EACH) BY **SAVANT.**

BAG ($2,200) BY **THANK YOU HAVE A GOOD DAY.**

WAVE BRACELET ($90) AND RAINBOW BRACELET ($75) BY **ROXANNE ASSOULIN;** BRACELET ($450) BY **BALENCIAGA,** SSENSE.COM.

SNEAKERS ($560) BY **GOLDEN GOOSE DELUXE BRAND.**

SHIRT ($175) BY **STUDIO ONE EIGHTY NINE.**

A Diver with z e s t

Louis Vuitton's new Tambour watch makes a big splash whether you take it in the ocean or not

BY NICK SULLIVAN

PROP STYLING: MIAKO KATOH. GETTY IMAGES (CLOUDS).

TAMBOUR STREET DIVER WATCH ($7,505) BY **LOUIS VUITTON;** FLORIDA STONE CRAB ($36 PER POUND), COURTESY **LOBSTER PLACE,** NEW YORK CITY.

HIGH-FASHION HOUSES RARELY do watchmaking well. Louis Vuitton is an exception. Take the Tambour, the French luxury brand's first watch, introduced in 2002. Its idiosyncratic case shape—wider at the bottom than at the top, like a drum, or a *tambour* in French—instantly set it apart from other watches. While a Tambour Slim version was later added to the range, the original remains the hero.

That doesn't mean it's a watch preserved in aspic. Multiple iterations of the Tambour have surfaced over the years, including decidedly high-end pieces of horological wizardry. But exploring the upper limits of technique (and price) isn't stopping Vuitton from playing in the more wearable end of the watchmaking pool—or, sorry, the ocean.

In April, Louis Vuitton debuted the Tambour Street Diver, an urban, street-inspired riff on the classic dive watch. It's well up to snuff in terms of technical performance, with screw-down crowns and a 100-meter water-resistance rating. It lacks an exterior diving bezel—it would have cluttered the iconic Tambour shape—which the designers built inside the watch instead. A second crown, at the 1:30 position, rotates the diving timescale under the sapphire crystal from the outside. Matching up the *V* on the scale with another *V* on the end of the minute hand—thereby forming an *X*—marks the moment you dive.

Go beyond the technicalities and the aesthetics take over. The 44mm case comes in three metal combos: black PVD-coated stainless steel, blue PVD and polished stainless steel, and black PVD with pink gold. Each features its own bold color accents, and each announces its presence on the wrist quite capably. It echoes a trend among other upscale brands toward watches that are seriously conceived but a lot of fun, too. Just the thing to lighten the mood this summer.

Watch Fact No. 123

The PVD—or "physical vapor deposition"—process adds color and texture by *vaporizing metal* in a vacuum and letting it *land* on a surface. Like, say, a watch case.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFFREY WESTBROOK

ADVERTISEMENT

SMARTEN UP TO SHRINK YOUR GUT

MORNING SHAKE CAN HELP YOU LOSING WEIGHT

BY CHRIS HANSEN

Being a trainer, bodybuilder, and nutrition expert means that companies frequently send me their products and ask for my stamp of approval. Most of the time I dive into research, test the product out, and send the company honest feedback. Sometimes, however, I refuse to give the product a try, because frankly, the ingredients inside aren't real food. And I'd rather drink diesel fuel than torture my body with a chemical concoction.

Like my father always said, "What you put inside your body always shows up on the outside."

One protein shake that I received, that will remain nameless, was touted as 'the next big shake' but really had a list of gut destroying ingredients. Everywhere I read I saw harmful artificial ingredients, added sugars, synthetic dyes, preservatives and cheap proteins; the kind of proteins that keep you fat no matter how hard you hit the gym, sap your energy and do nothing for your muscles.

Disappointed after reviewing this "new" shake, I hit the gym and bumped into my favorite bodybuilding coach. This guy is pushing 50, has the energy of a college kid, and is ripped. So are his clients.

While I firmly believe that the gym is a no-talk focus zone, I had to ask, "Hey Zee, what protein shake are you recommending to your clients these days?"

Zee looked at me, and shook his head. "Protein shakes are old news and loaded with junk. I don't recommend protein shakes, I tell my clients to drink INVIGOR8 Superfood Shake because it's the only all natural meal replacement that works and has a taste so good that it's addicting."

Being skeptical of what Zee told me, I decided to investigate this superfood shake called INVIGOR8.

Turns out INVIGOR8 Superfood Shake has a near 5-star rating on Amazon. The creators are actual scientists and personal trainers who set out to create a complete meal replacement shake chocked full of superfoods that—get this—actually accelerate how quickly and easily you lose belly fat and builds even more lean, calorie burning muscle.

We all know that the more muscle you build, the more calories you burn. The more fat you melt away the more definition you get in your arms, pecs and abs.

The makers of INVIGOR8 were determined to make the first complete, natural, non-GMO superfood shake that helps you lose fat and build lean muscle. The result is a shake that contains 100% grass-fed whey that has a superior nutrient profile to the grain-fed whey found in most shakes, metabolism boosting raw coconut oil, hormone free colostrum to promote a healthy immune system, Omega 3, 6, 9-rich chia and flaxseeds, superfood greens like kale, spinach, broccoli, alfalfa, and chlorella, and clinically tested cognitive enhancers for improved mood and brain function. The company even went a step further by including a balance of pre and probiotics for regularity in optimal digestive health, and digestive enzymes so your body absorbs the high-caliber nutrition you get from INVIGOR8.

While there are over 2000 testimonials on Amazon about how INVIGOR8 "gave me more energy and stamina" and "melts away abdominal fat like butter on a hot sidewalk", what really impressed me was how many customers raved about the taste. So I had to give it a try.

When it arrived I gave it the sniff test. Unlike most meal replacement shakes it smelled like whole food, not a chemical factory. So far so good. Still INVIGOR8 had to pass the most important test, the taste test.

And INVIGOR8 was good. Better than good. I could see what Zee meant when he said his clients found the taste addicting.

I also wanted to see if Invigor8 would help me burn that body fat I'd tried to shave off for years to achieve total definition.

Just a few weeks later I'm pleased to say, shaving that last abdominal fat from my midsection wasn't just easy. It was delicious.

Considering all the shakes I've tried I can honestly say that the results I've experienced from INVIGOR8 are nothing short of astonishing.

A company spokesperson confirmed an exclusive offer for Esquire's readers: if you order INVIGOR8 this month, you'll receive $10 off your first order by using promo code "**ESQ10**" at checkout. If you're in a rush to burn fat, restore lean muscle and boost your stamina and energy you can order INVIGOR8 today at www.Invigor8.com or by calling 1-800-958-3392.

The Return of the Man p e r m

A perm (yes, a perm) might just be your ticket to a good hair day, every day

BY GARRETT MUNCE

1. THE WOKE-UP-LIKE-THIS

2. THE "IT'S NOT A PERM" PERM

3. THE VOLUMIZER

4. THE BED-HEAD CURL

5. THE ROYAL WAVE

6. THE SUPERHERO

HAIR CREDITS: 1) TIMOTHÉE CHALAMET. 2) MINHO. 3) CHANYEOL. 4) OSCAR ISAAC. 5) KIT HARINGTON. 6) HENRY CAVILL. NOTE: NOT ALL THESE MEN HAVE PERMS, BUT A PERM CAN GIVE YOU GREAT HAIR LIKE THEIRS.

WHERE DOES YOUR MIND GO when you hear the word *perm*? Dee Snider. Your mom, circa 1987. Poodles. That's fair. But here's the thing: Thanks to advances in technology and technique, a perm looks good now. Really good. I shit you not. A whole generation of guys is discovering it's their fast track to the best hair they've ever had.

Matt Huang had none of this context when he got a perm. In fact, he didn't even plan to get one. It was K-pop's fault. Visiting his grandparents in China, he took a photo of Minho, a singer and actor, to a salon as inspiration. The stylist prescribed a perm. "I thought it was an old-lady hairstyle," he says. But he went with it—and was floored by how much he liked the result. Even more surprising was the reaction from his friends back home in the U.S., some of whom revealed they'd gotten perms, too. "They were so well done and natural looking, I had assumed it was their natural hair texture."

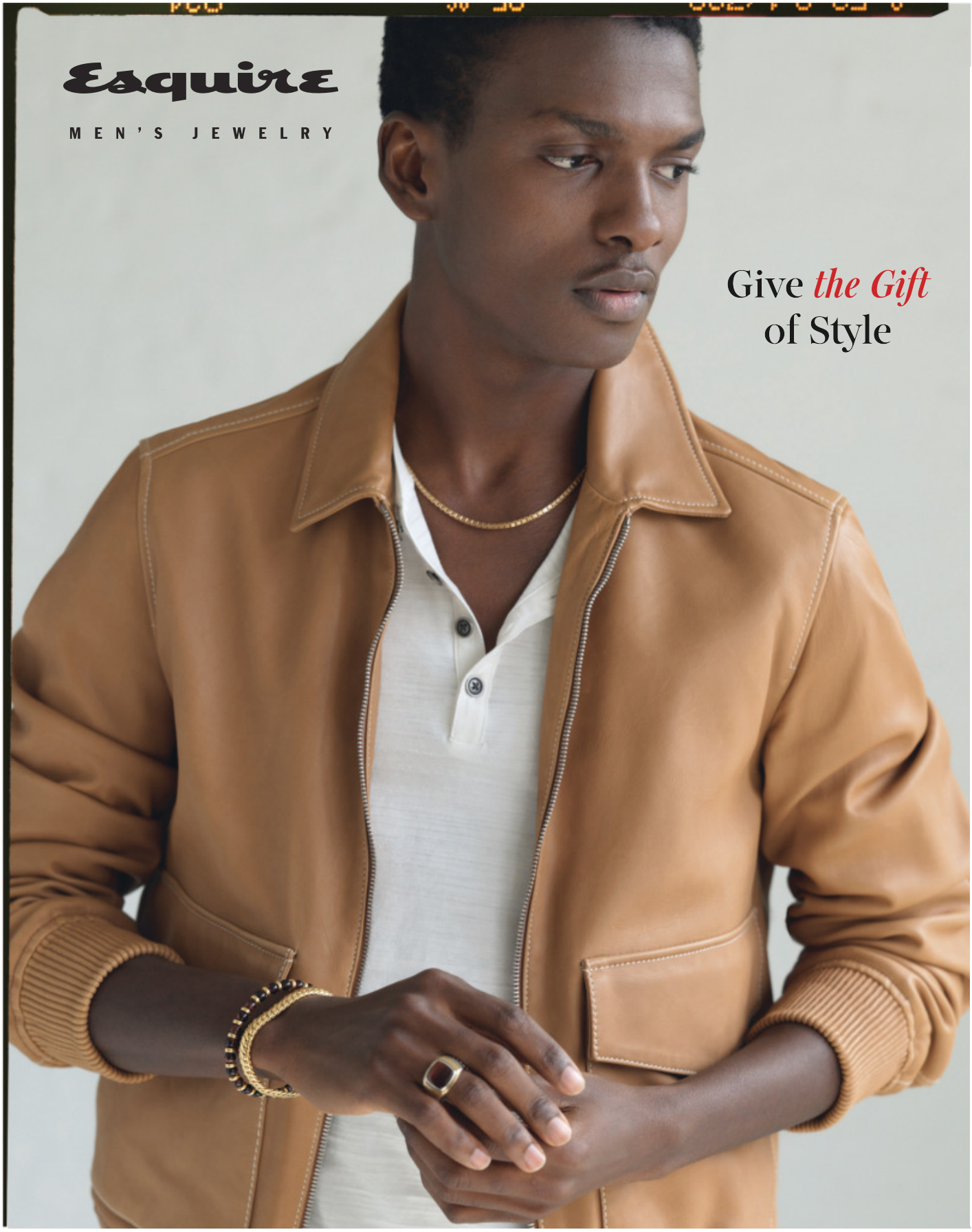
A man perm might be run-of-the-mill in Asia, but it was still uncommon stateside—until recently. Courtesy of social media, the style is becoming the new high and tight. As of this writing, #maleperm has 3.8 million views and counting on TikTok. It's also big on Instagram, because "it's such a visual service with a major transformation," says Tina le Noble Gentry, a hairstylist in New York City.

Even dudes who don't know they want a perm want a perm. Hairstylist Anthony Cole noticed teenage boys flocking to his Long Island salon from Brooklyn, Staten Island, and Manhattan, clutching pictures of curly-haired Spanish soccer players and asking for something similar. They didn't know what a perm was but were game to try one and, "of course, [post to] Snapchat with rollers in their hair," he says. Through word of mouth, their friends began banging down his door, too.

"The technology and science behind perms has changed so much; there's a lot of variation," says Gentry. The equation is generally the same—curling lotion + rollers + time—but new lotions and a wide range of roller sizes allow current perms to go beyond the finger-in-an-electrical-socket look. We can thank the decades-long popularity of perms in Asia for driving this innovation. Compared with the harsh treatments of the '80s, Korean-style perms are quite gentle, says Ai Kim, a hairstylist at New Hair salon in New York City. You can walk away with a subtle natural wave, tight ringlets, or anything in between. And apart from the initial process, which can last two to three hours, they're fairly low-maintenance. "It used to take me a good half hour to do my hair," says Niko Maragos, who got his first perm to avoid bringing "an arsenal of hair products" on vacation. "Now I can just get up and go."

Most men's hairstyling depends on adding texture and volume to make hair look fuller. A perm does that in one shot. But for the perm to look its best, your hair needs to be long enough to really show the curl. That could also be why more men are down to perm: After more than a year of growth in quarantine (or at least fewer haircuts), styles are getting longer and texture is the name of the game. And once you take the leap, if you're anything like Huang, you'll wish your perm life had started sooner.

DIA DIPASUPIL/GETTY IMAGES (CHALAMET). HAN MYUNG-GU/WIREIMAGE (MINHO). THE CHOSUNILBO JNS/IMAZINS VIA GETTY IMAGES (CHANYEOL). JIM SPELLMAN/WIREIMAGE (ISAAC). FRAZER HARRISON/GETTY IMAGES (HARINGTON). TIM MOSENFELDER/GETTY IMAGES (CAVILL).



LEFT TO RIGHT: Red Tiger Eye Bead Bracelet in 14k Gold-Plated Sterling Silver, $375; Heavy Serpentine Link Bracelet in 14k Gold-Plated Silver, $900; 22" Chain Necklace in 14k Gold-Plated Sterling Silver (one of 2-pc set), $650; Tiger's Eye Ring in Sterling Silver & 14k Gold, $975

★macy's

THE BEST

Fadensonnen

White Limozeen

Serenata

bars

IN AMERICA 2021

ON APRIL FIFTEENTH, at 8:42 P.M., I had a drink.

Not on Zoom. Not alone on my couch. Not outside, under a heat lamp. Nope. Inside, on a stool, at the actual, physical bar. For the first time in more than a year.

To sit shoulder to shoulder with friends again, chatting with the bartender about esoteric spirits, hearing the laughter of strangers—it felt new and raw. Even with the masked staff and social distancing, the experience was unexpectedly life-affirming. All of a sudden, I felt like me again.

Perhaps it was what I was drinking at Viridian, an Asian American bar in Oakland, one of the places on this year's Best Bars list; many of the cocktails nodded to flavors of Asian candies my dad would surprise me with when he returned from grocery runs in New York's Chinatown. But I suspect that I would have been hit with joy if it was any drink at any bar that had reopened its doors to do what bars do best: hospitality.

Bars are simultaneously a place to be by oneself and a place of community. An escape and a home away from home. That vanished as many were forced to transform into takeout joints or, worse yet, to permanently close. In a time when life and work and family bled into one another in messy ways, the bar is that much-needed extra space—physically, emotionally—that we could all use right now. Return to the office? Eh . . . not so much. A place where you can sip on a Sazerac, take a moment, catch up with the world, and decide to celebrate or brood? More of that kind of normal, please.

This year's Best Bars are a reflection of the desire to experience wonder once more—in being introduced to mind-expanding wines and whiskeys, downing pints in old churches, or hunkering in jazzy spaces again—and to be grateful for places that managed to remain intrinsic to the fabric of drinking culture in America. A pioneering cocktail den in Harlem, one of the oldest sake bars in America, and a quintessential Mission District dive are all part of this year's list, our fifteenth.

Even as our bars reanimate, there are those who will want to keep things al fresco for a while, vaccine or not. I get that. Let's embrace outdoor drinking as an essential part of bar culture, as so many other parts of the world have. Still, there's nothing like a real seat, at a real bar. That's why bars are called bars, right? We hope you'll be able to have that cathartic first drink on a barstool again soon. Things are different out there in weird ways, but you may find some old traditions coming up through the ether, too—I've never seen (or had) more shots in my twenty-odd years as a drinker on this planet. Apparently, it's time to celebrate. Down the hatch.

—KEVIN SINTUMUANG

Lazy Bird

DANIELLE ATKINS (DRINK, LEFT). JUSTIN FLYTHE (COURTYARD). COURTESY LAZY BIRD (DRINK, RIGHT). KIR TUBEN PHOTOGRAPHY (SERENATA).

Atlanta

WATCHMAN'S

A dash of French inspiration, a touch of Caribbean influence, and a little southern flair make Watchman's a destination for vibrant regional seafood—Florida, Alabama, and Georgia oysters are front and center—and truly perfect drinks. Co-owner Miles Macquarrie has an allegiance to standards. But his thoughtful recipes also merge nerdy tinkering techniques, like a highball eschewing sparkling wine for a mix of aged rum, lime, and carbonated albariño, with balanced flavor and gorgeous presentation—vibrant hues grab the eye in builds that taste like a luxury vacation. *99 Krog Street* —OSAYI ENDOLYN

Baltimore

FADENSONNEN

My evening at Fadensonnen began with a shot of amaro. It ended with me stepping out into the streets of the Old Goucher neighborhood, holding a bottle of organic sake the size of a warhead, and continuing the party elsewhere. Such can be the trajectory of a night at this elegantly rustic courtyard with a multilevel natural-wine, beer, and sake hangout built into an old carriage house by Lane Harlan and Matthew Pierce, purveyors of some of Charm City's most interesting watering holes. An artsy, agrarian edge percolates among the bottles and the crowd. For those who ever doubted that Baltimore could be cool, just have a shot here. *3 West Twenty-third Street* —K. S.

MINISTRY OF BREWING

Belinda Carlisle's "Heaven Is a Place on Earth" plays as I walk into St. Michael's Church in Upper Fells Point, a nineteenth-century Romanesque Revival landmark that's now home to Ministry of Brewing. I'll take that as a sign that this is the right place. In the pulpit sit the shining tanks brewing classic styles and restrained, creative takes like Lemon Basil Blonde Ale. Grab a cold one, have a seat at one of the beer-hall-style tables, and admire the paintings of saints beaming from the barrel-vaulted ceiling. What are you feeling? Perhaps it's a greater power. Or maybe it's just 9.9 Problems, the potent, 9.9 percent ABV stout. *1900 East Lombard Street* —K. S.

Brooklyn

HUNKY DORY

This corner spot in the Crown Heights hood is where you can start your day with coffee, get a martini garnished with pickled okra alongside a platter of oysters for a boozy lunch (because why not?), and gather with some friends for a cold-brew Irish-coffee pick-me-up in the evening. While the inside of Hunky Dory is a gorgeous, light-filled space, this past year its sprawling patio has been the place to be, playing host to weekly chef pop-ups. Though it's not obvious from the delicious drinks, owner Claire Sprouse is a force in sustainability in the bar world. Check out her digital magazine, *Optimistic Cocktails,* with recipes using food waste from around the country. *747 Franklin Avenue* —K. S.

Chicago

LAZY BIRD

Hidden beneath the Hoxton Hotel, Lazy Bird could win on moody, jazz-age seduction alone. But it's the ambitious cocktails—fifty-two of them in a leather-bound book complete with ingredients and illustrations—that are the true draw. There are dialed-in classics like the Hemingway daiquiri and deep cuts like the rum-forward Mary Pickford and the Blackthorn, an ode to Irish whiskey. You'll emerge from the bar impeccably buzzed and enlightened. *200 North Green Street* —K. S.

Cincinnati

COMFORT STATION

You won't stumble across Comfort Station. Even if you happen to be up in Cincinnati's

The courtyard at Baltimore's Fadensonnen, where it's all about natural wines, sakes, and spritzes.

Walnut Hills neighborhood, the likelihood of you taking a chance on a women's restroom door on the front of what used to be a public bathhouse is slim. But should you tentatively push through, you'll find what feels like the city's spiritual center. Inside, the bartenders whip out gems like Heaven, My Reward—a frothy sour with adobo chile that, yeah, is heaven—and Hot Damn, Son!, which any sucker for manhattans and oatmeal cookies will buckle for. *793 East McMillan Street* —SARAH RENSE

Dayton, Ohio

TENDER MERCY

Tender Mercy opened three days before the shutdown—bad luck, that was—so for a year this ambitious oasis in the nowhereland of southwestern Ohio stayed a secret, except to the Daytonians who drank their last great cocktail there before lockdown began. Enter through the subway stairway the bar convinced the city to let it burrow into the concrete. Then walk deeper into the underground cavern, where you'll encounter a library, a vault turned drinking nook, a sprawling bar serving draft drinks, a wall of (tastefully) naked ladies, followed by a backroom cocktail den with a fireplace and a photo of Richard Gere smoldering against the booze bottles. *607 East Third Street* —S. R.

Denver

NOBLE RIOT

The fact that Colorado makes some pretty interesting natural wines is just one of the things you'll learn at Noble Riot, an unlikely wine bar located down a graffiti-and-mural-adorned alley in Denver's RiNo neighborhood. In general, whether you're perusing one of the zine-like menus or being recommended pét-nat from Chile or pairing a big red from Palestine with a bucket of crunchy fried chicken, what you'll discover is that wine can be wild and fun, even in the middle of craft-beer country. *1336 Twenty-seventh Street* —K. S.

Los Angeles

THUNDERBOLT

An homage to the South, a nod to adjacent historic Filipinotown, and a lot of SoCal hangout vibes are what you get at Thunderbolt. You'll often find a creative julep on the menu, as well as the P-Town Boxing Club, an old-fashioned with pandan syrup and coconut-washed rye, both of which are good precursors to the fried-green-tomato sando. The nitro-draft espresso martini is a delightfully surprising kick of a drink. *1263 West Temple Street* —K. S.

Louisville

TROUBLE BAR

"Whiskey got me into trouble"—that's the promise painted on the outside of Trouble, where the bar's stocked with bottle after bottle of Kentucky booze and all that stuffy Bourbon Trail hero worship is dropped at the door. Set aside at least twenty minutes in the airy space to pore over the literary journal of a bourbon flight menu, in which whiskey-industry friends of founders Nicole Stipp and Kaitlyn Soligan Owens have curated their own tasting journeys and written at length about the *why* of each selection. It's okay to count the Thursday night special, a $25 pitcher of house old-fashioned, as an hors d'oeuvre. *1149 South Shelby Street* —S. R.

Manchester, Vermont

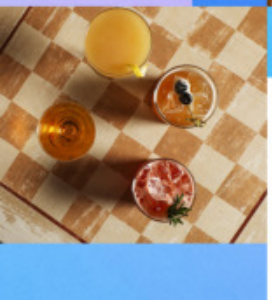
THE CROOKED RAM

You probably don't expect to find a Copenhagen-style beer and wine bar on a country road in Vermont. But the Crooked Ram is the sort of place where the owners are wine savvy enough to offer a Cviček from Slovenia on the by-the-glass menu—and attentive enough to serve it chilled, the way it's supposed to be. More surprises await: The food menu, from rising star Nevin Taylor, offers not only thirst stokers like charcuterie and tinned fish but (depending on the evening) luxurious dishes like butter-poached swordfish and king-crab meat blanketed in béarnaise sauce. And even though a lot of thought has gone into the enterprise, you don't encounter the slightest trace of grape-geek snobbery. *4026 Main Street* —JEFF GORDINIER

The Clover Club cocktail at Chicago's Lazy Bird is just one of fifty-two classics on the menu.

JUSTIN FLYTHE (DRINKS, LEFT, AND COURTYARD). COURTESY LAZY BIRD (COCKTAIL, RIGHT).

Located in a former rectory, the Elysian Bar in New Orleans keeps the homey feel but adds cocktails.



Nashville

WHITE LIMOZEEN

Named for Dolly Parton's twenty-ninth solo album, White Limozeen perches atop the roof of the Graduate Hotel like an outrageous wig. The decor—crystal chandeliers and an onyx wraparound bar—is matched by the cocktail menu: the frozen Aperol spritz, the magenta-hued Queen of the Rodeo, and Champagne Jell-O shots topped with Pop Rocks. The large deck beckons with its chaises and fringed pink umbrellas. Guests can take a dip in the pool, admire the view of Nashville, or just lounge in the shadow of Dolly's larger-than-life bust (excuse the pun), a ten-foot-tall sculpture fashioned from pink chicken wire. *101 Twentieth Avenue North* —BETH ANN FENNELLY

New Orleans

THE ELYSIAN BAR

The Church at St. Peter and Paul, the new hotel in the Marigny, welcomes new worshippers to the Elysian Bar, in what had been the rectory. It maintains its homey feeling, with a cozy, saffron-walled jewel-box bar that has just eight stools snugged close to a backdrop hand-painted to pay homage to the bald cypress, the state tree of Louisiana. The adjoining redbrick courtyard, ringed by church bell towers and featuring wrought-iron café tables tucked among the lush potted palms and gemstone light leaking from the stained-glass windows, is perhaps the best place in the nation to sip an Aperol spritz at aperitivo hour. Give it a try and see if you don't leave filled with the spirit. *2317 Burgundy Street* —B. A. F.

New York City

67 ORANGE STREET

This lively Harlem hangout has a timeworn vibe that makes it feel older than its age—owner/bartender Karl Franz Williams and his team have held court here since 2008, and the name is the address of one of the first Black-owned businesses in N. Y. C., Almack's Dance Hall, from the 1840s. The cocktails straddle the line between serious and fun, like the Color Purple, a sublimely balanced blackberry sour, and the Caribbean Porn Star Martini, a rumified version of the modern passion-fruit classic. *2082 Frederick Douglass Boulevard* —K. S.

DOUBLE CHICKEN PLEASE

The name is a giveaway: This is a whimsical bar. But it also has a gorgeously clubby vibe and a cheekily innovative menu. It serves a killer fried-chicken sandwich, but the tofu version, with sesame and peanut butter, just might best it. GN Chan and Faye Chen, who originally toured DCP around the country as a pop-up in a VW van, make some of the most super-creative draft cocktails you'll find, including the #6, which tastes as if a margarita met a Bloody Mary and had a shot of absinthe. Speaking of shots, they get inventive with those, too: Mezcal, plum, and shiso is a combo that you'll instantly consider having two of. Go for it. The night always feels young here. *115 Allen Street* —K. S.

DECIBEL

New York City is like a multilevel version of *Being John Malkovich*, with a plenitude of portals that will *whoosh* you off to a different place and time in a matter of seconds. You may start in the East Village, but if you descend the basement stairs into Decibel when the little red sign on Ninth Street is lit up with the words ON AIR, you will find yourself in the Shimokitazawa district of Tokyo. Decibel is dungeon-dark and has been devoted to sake for more than a quarter century. The music is loud and the tables are small. Whether your sake loyalties lie with honjozo or "I don't know," Decibel offers you a chance to remedy your fermented-rice ignorance or deepen your expertise. There are seasonal rhythms to sake, so have a conversation with your server about what suits the moment. *240 East Ninth Street* —J. G.

Oakland

VIRIDIAN

Viridian can feel like walking into a fuzzy dream. The room has a color palette borrowed from Wong Kar-wai's poetic

COURTESY HOTEL PETER (2).

Chungking Express, one of the most stylish films to explore the idea of memory. But it's the way that some of the more soulful drinks, created by William Tsui, tap into the collective culinary consciousness of an Asian childhood that is the bar's magic. It turns out haw flakes, those red, coin-sized disks wrapped in cylinders–if you know, you know–are a great flavor to play with in a tropical cocktail. Add an okonomiyaki with the texture of a crunchy hash brown and you will sleep well tonight. *2216 Broadway* –K. S.

Pittsburgh

CON ALMA

If you want to immediately and inexplicably become the star of your very own film noir, walk within ten feet of Con Alma. You'll hear jazz slinking out of the place before you even know which building is the club, your world–and the night–going black-and-white. Your mission: Visit when there's a posse of local legends riffing right by the entrance, usually between 6:00 and 10:00 P.M. Then–and this is the hard part–drink like you're Humphrey frickin' Bogart. That means an Old Cuban by the koi pond on the outdoor patio. Once your thoughts become jazz and the jazz becomes your thoughts, you'll know you're doing it right. *5884 Ellsworth Avenue* –BRADY LANGMANN

Portland, Oregon

SCOTCH LODGE

It's simple: If you're looking to have your mind expanded through whiskey, come here. You'll find everything from rare Macallans to obscure, soul-heating bourbons. Single-ounce pours mean you can really take a round-the-world journey. While whiskey bars with deep lists are nothing new, Scotch Lodge has a decidedly sophisticated yet unpretentious energy, impressive bites, and a cocktail list that is a master class in pushing what Scotch can do. Try the Islay daiquiri. *215 Southeast Ninth Avenue, Suite 102* –K. S.

San Diego

J & TONY'S DISCOUNT CURED MEATS AND NEGRONI WAREHOUSE

What would your dream clubhouse be? For CH Projects, the team behind San Diego's coolest bars, it's J & Tony's, a madcap, idiosyncratic space of impeccable details–a tube-amp sound system, espresso served in Japanese ceramic vessels, a sculpture of a dragon, walls dressed up like honeycombs. The bar is devoted to the spirit of the Italian aperitivo, all day every day–they open at 8:00 A.M. (!)–with some twists along the way. The house negroni is brightened up with some clarified lemon, Cynar slides into a next-level espresso martini, and their ham-and-egg sandwich will top your list of breakfast foods. Cocktail-centric zaniness was never this low-key cool and delicious. *631 Ninth Avenue* –K. S.

San Francisco

PHONE BOOTH

The inside is dark and dingy and the smell of cigarette smoke still lingers faintly. Your pool stick hits the wall because the room it's stuffed into is too small, and the jukebox is an eighties new-wave ode heavy on Depeche Mode. PBR is on tap, making that $10 PB+J(ameson) special that much more sweet. If this sounds similar to your neighborhood watering hole, that's because that's exactly what Phone Booth, located in the Mission District, is; there are thousands like it across America, and yet there is none quite the same. *1398 South Van Ness Avenue* –OMAR MAMOON

GN Chan and Faye Chen of Double Chicken Please and one of their cocktails on tap (right).

NAPA'S COOLEST TASTING EXPERIENCE

ASHES & DIAMONDS

Unless you're an oenophile or at a bachelorette party, wine tastings can be, well, dull. Sure, you could say they're more about education, but that doesn't mean a tasting can't make for a bucolic afternoon with friends and some koji-cured roast chicken with a crunchy bread salad and, yes, great wine. That's the vibe at the Palm Springs–esque, architecturally stunning Ashes & Diamonds. Like a great bar, this place will show you a world you might not have known about, and also make it fun. ***4130 HOWARD LANE, NAPA*** —K. S.

The Tomato Beef cocktail (tequila, basil eau-de-vie, tomato water) from Viridian.

JEREMY CHIU (COCKTAIL, BOTTOM). COURTESY ASHES & DIAMONDS (LANDSCAPE). LIMON PHOTOGRAPHY (REMAINING).

KONA'S STREET MARKET

The cocktails at KSM are inspired by street markets the world over. What does that translate to? As bartender Kevin Diedrich demonstrated with Asian cocktails at sister bar Pacific Cocktail Haven, some righteous alchemy: a mezcal negroni mellowed out after four weeks in a clay pot, tamarind and date molasses melding with rye, and a martini made even more vibrant with skinos, a Greek liqueur reminiscent of pine sap. With food from chef Francis Ang of Pinoy Heritage, the vibe is as fun as, well, a street market. *32 Third Street* –K. S.

The intimate space that is Vaquero Bar, in Solvang, California.

PANDEMIC INNOVATIONS

HERE'S HOW SOME PREVIOUS BEST BARS ROSE TO A CHALLENGE

BOOZY ICE POPS
Julep, Houston, Best Bars 2017
Delivered in an ice cream truck, naturally.

FROZEN PIÑA COLADAS
Long Island Bar, Brooklyn, Best Bars 2014
Frozen piñas are nothing new, of course, but served from a specialized machine that makes the drink closer to a frosty is next level.

MARTINI FOUR-PACKS, AND A NEGRONI EIGHT-PACK TO GO
Dante, New York, Best Bars 2018
Dante makes some of the best martini and negroni variations in the country. These made the pandemic go by a little bit faster.

Seattle

ROQUETTE

Sometimes you just want to disappear into a moody drink, in a place with a mural of palm trees at twilight, listening to Latin jazz with sprinkles of conversations poking over the walls of your leather banquette, occasionally interrupted by the distinct sound of big blocks of ice shaken in a metal tin. Don't bother asking for something that's not too sweet at Roquette, a Belltown bar from Erik Hakkinen, a longtime bartender at legendary Zig Zag Café; that does not exist in this corner of the universe. The cocktails, like the place itself, tilt toward the brooding, with mezcals, overproof rums, and a multitude of French spirits–even the mai tai has cognac. But there are glimmers of levity: caviar with Bugles, anyone? *2232 First Avenue* –K. S.

Solvang, California

VAQUERO BAR

In this charmingly quirky Danish village, long a base for exploring the region's vineyards–this is where much of Alexander Payne's *Sideways* was filmed–chef Lincoln Carson of Bon Temps in Los Angeles (a 2019 Esquire Best New Restaurant that was recently shuttered due to the pandemic), along with Anthony Carron and Steven Fretz, has created the town's coolest place to ease into the evening. There might not be a more fun way to transition from a day of sipping merlots than a Smoke and Wine cocktail–think a cross between a sangria and a New York sour–and a mound of fried pig ears sprinkled with fancy Cheetos dust. The best part about wine tasting in the Santa Ynez Valley may be this afterparty. *1635 Mission Drive* –K. S.

Sonoma, California

VALLEY BAR + BOTTLE

Valley is part bottle shop, part restaurant, and part wine bar, with an emphasis on organic, small-production, low-intervention biodynamic wines from around the world. The food is as California as it gets–featuring pristine produce from farms in Sonoma County. It's that rare idyllic spot where for hours you can find yourself snacking on small plates of Spanish anchovies and piles of mortadella between sips of a cold, cloudy, funky esoteric orange from a varietal you've never had from a country you can barely place. *487 First Street West* –O. M.

Washington, D. C.

TIKI TNT

Just look for the smokestack along the Potomac that says "Make Rum, Not War" and you'll find raucous, Tiki-fueled times spread out among various airy levels at this bar that also houses a distillery from Todd Thrasher, one of the area's OG cocktail mavens. The classics are unimpeachable, but the original drinks are even more lively: The frozen Rum "in" Coke is the natural place to begin. A glass of the sip-worthy Thrasher's coconut rum is a good place to end. *1130 Maine Avenue SW* –K. S.

SERENATA

At this gently curving bar in the heart of La Cosecha, a newish Latin American marketplace, the drinks, overseen by beverage director Andra "AJ" Johnson, can have a pantry's worth of ingredients. The results, a showcase of Latin American spirits, are cocktails that are incredibly complex and stunningly presented, yet as easy-drinking as anything you would want on a tropical getaway. The elegant French Kissed in Jalisco, a kind of tequila vesper, will have you realizing there's a bigger universe to explore when it comes to agave. *1280 Fourth Street NE* –K. S.

JEREMY BALL

For a love letter to the worst bars, see page 104.

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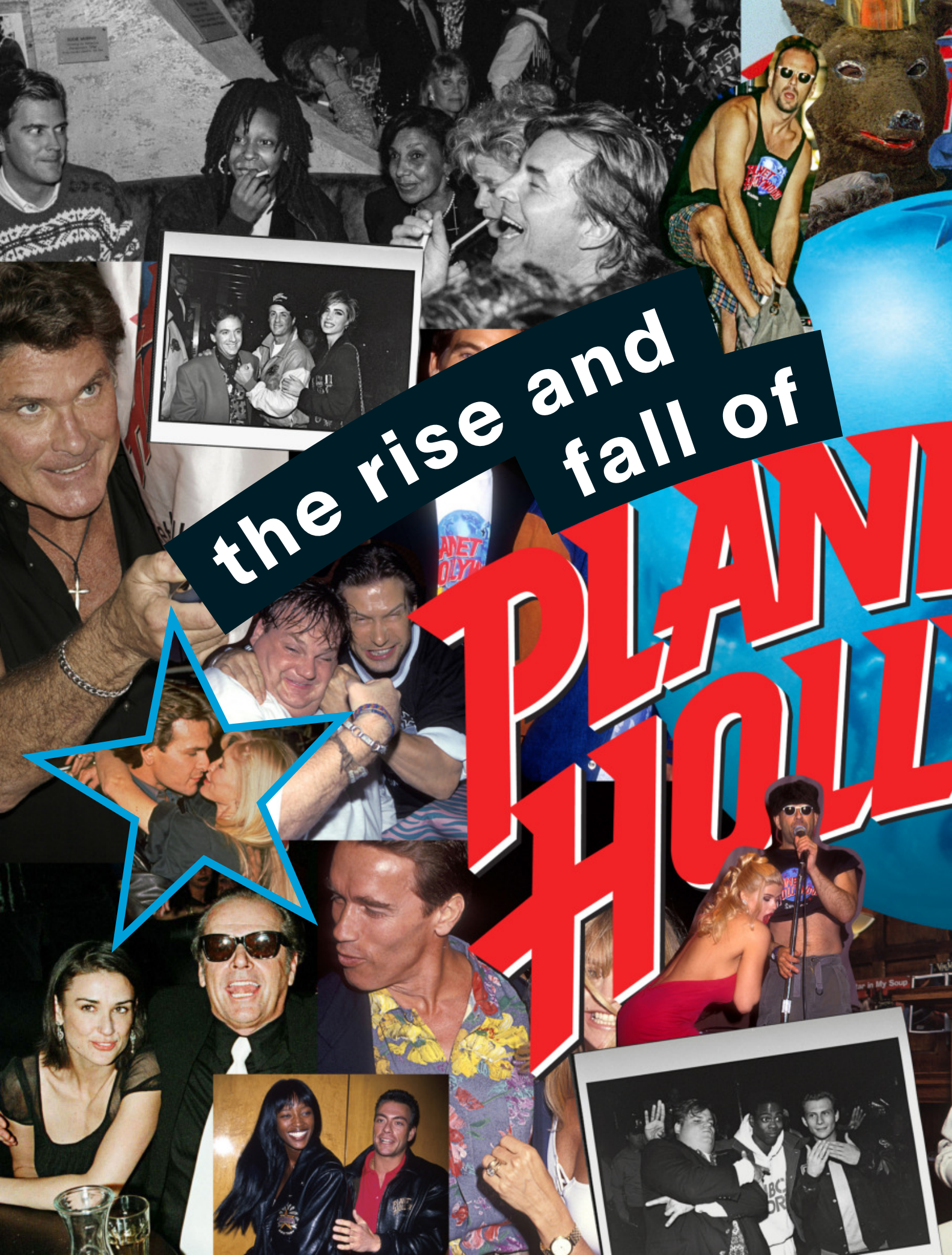
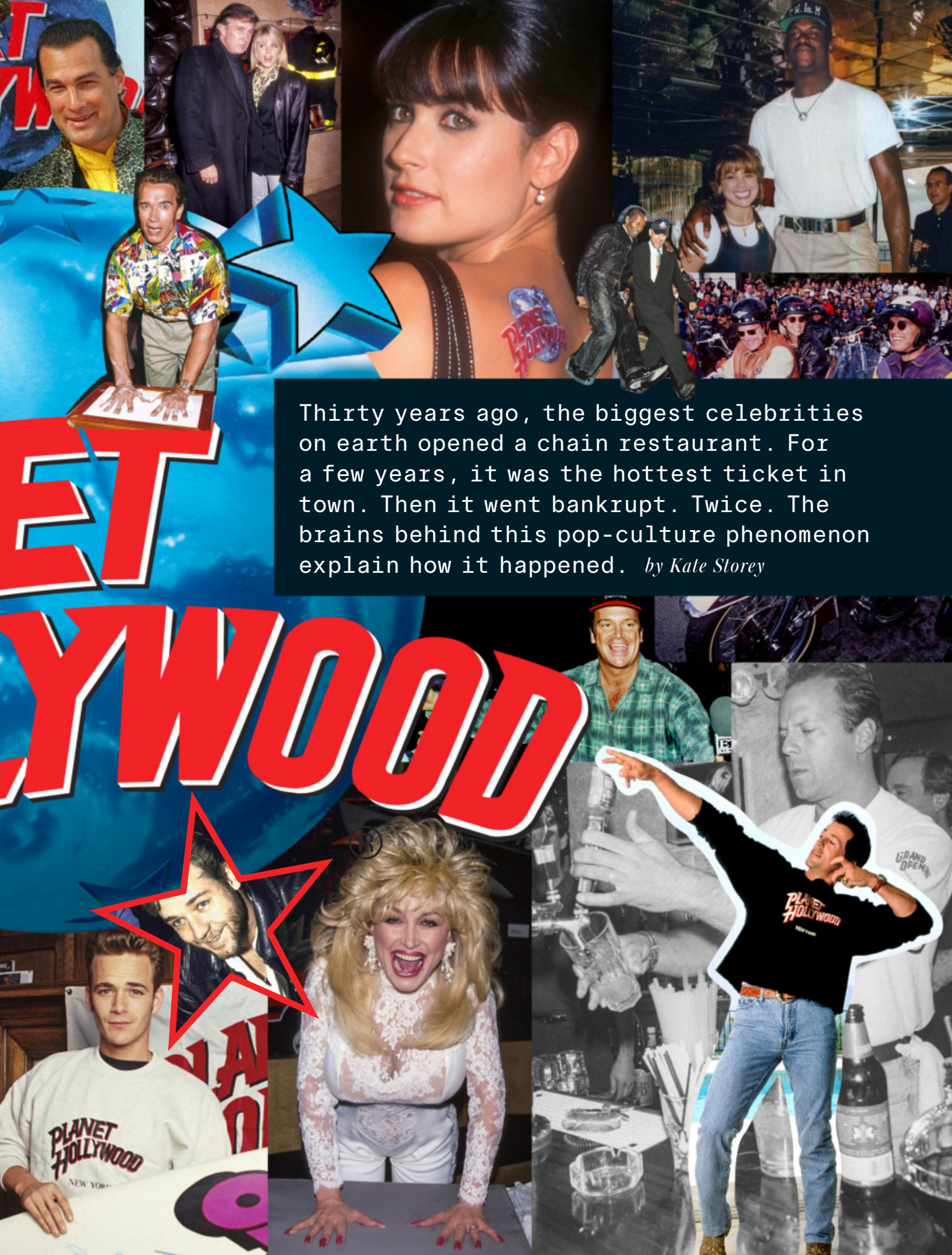

the rise and
fall of
PLANET HOLLYWOOD

ET LYWOOD

Thirty years ago, the biggest celebrities on earth opened a chain restaurant. For a few years, it was the hottest ticket in town. Then it went bankrupt. Twice. The brains behind this pop-culture phenomenon explain how it happened. *by Kate Storey*



Roseanne Barr stood behind three feet of neon-blue glass,

bottles of gin, vodka, bourbon, and tequila lined up behind her. White cement squares with handprints covered the walls. It was September 17, 1995; Barr was the reigning queen of prime-time television, but on this particular night she was wearing an oversize red T-shirt adorned with PLANET HOLLYWOOD across its front, cleaning a glass behind the bar at America's most popular chain restaurant.

Patrick Swayze, seven years on from his *Dirty Dancing* performance, sidled up to the bar. His hair was trimmed short, a sweep of bangs covering his forehead. A couple buddies with him: Wesley Snipes and John Leguizamo. He paused, eyeballing Barr.

"Hey, can I get a Pink Lady?"

The din of the crowd picked up, drowning out the music. Surrounding the revelers that night was movie memorabilia: Rita Hayworth's dress from *Gilda,* Nurse Ratched's hospital whites from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest,* Forrest Gump's box of chocolates. The Planet Hollywood logo loomed large, reflected on the ceiling.

Two weeks earlier, Charlie Sheen had covered every supermarket tabloid for his marriage to model Donna Peele. The pair had met just six weeks before the wedding. Here he was, the happy newlywed (for now) in a suit and tie, bespectacled and goateed, elbowing his way to Barr. Sheen's drink order? A Major League Hotshot.

"You're married now," Barr quipped.

"You're right," he fired back. "What about a Sex on the Beach?"

Before his drink arrived, Sheen got a tap on the shoulder: Luke Perry in a Planet Hollywood bomber jacket. "I gotta have something that's going to take me to another ZIP code."

Jean-Claude Van Damme, all muscle and martial arts and hair gel, shouted in his Belgian accent that he was in the mood for something with "some kick, some spice."

Without missing a beat, Barr, who was pouring a drink for Danny Glover, said:

"Try the Rockettes. I hear they're French." A pause, as if to wait for the laughter and applause of a live studio audience, then George Clooney leaned over the bar—Caesar-cut, *ER* George Clooney—yelling, "There's an emergency! I need a drink!"

If this sounds not at all organic, not at all resembling what these incredibly famous people would order or just a little too scripted, that's because it likely was. This was opening night of the Planet Hollywood on Rodeo Drive. Every celebrity you could imagine was there. It was the hottest ticket in town. ABC aired a special event, *Planet Hollywood Comes Home.* The cops shut down the street. All this for a chain restaurant that served chicken coated in Cap'n Crunch. And not just a chain restaurant but a *theme* restaurant. A Rainforest Cafe with celebrities. It seems unfathomable now that stars would go along with this.

But they appeared to be having a ball. For a few years in the nineties, these stars dropped any pretense of hauteur, while everyone else succumbed to their love of celebrity by paying ten dollars to eat a burger under the Terminator's leather jacket. Cheesy? Yes. A massive—but fleeting—success unlike anything before it? A resounding yes.

By the start of the next decade, the enterprise would collapse, falling into bankruptcy twice, and the bold-faced names who reveled there would begin to walk away. Today, there's a tendency among the stars involved to be overcome with sudden amnesia. It seems they'd rather we all just forget about the whole thing.

This is the untold story of the ultimate collaboration between A-list celebs and overpriced appetizers. A creation only the nineties could give us.

"It's like the Oscars," Oprah said of Planet Hollywood in 1995, "only better."

THE PLANET HOLLYWOOD IN MANHATTAN has been closed to customers since the start of the pandemic; a rep for the chain said that takeout is still available and that the company is "evaluating what we are going to do next." (When I wanted to try some of that Cap'n Crunch chicken myself and attempted to order takeout, no one picked up.) In 2000, they ditched the original Fifty-seventh Street location for 1540 Broadway, the middle of Times Square, with an entrance on Forty-fifth Street, tucked behind a Sunglass Hut and across the street from the headquarters of Viacom, home to MTV, VH1, and Nickelodeon. It's as if the nineties signed a hundred-year lease on that particular block of pricey midtown real estate. You could easily walk right past this totem of celebrity, if it weren't for the crowds that—prepandemic at least—lined up outside. Yes, as recently as early 2020, tourists came to New York to dine at Planet Hollywood.

Times Square is packed with chain restaurants, just like any American shopping mall: Olive Garden, TGI Fridays, Hard Rock Cafe. Thirty years ago, they represented a new wave in dining: The

Keith Barish and friends at Planet Hollywood circa 1991. Entrances to Planet Hollywoods in New York (left) and Disneyland Paris. Diners enjoy the ambience in 1997 (bottom right).

PAGES 50–51, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JIM STEINFELDT/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES; MARK REINSTEIN/GETTY IMAGES; KARL MITTENZWEI/GETTY IMAGES; DAVE BENETT/GETTY IMAGES; RON GALELLA/GETTY IMAGES; SHUTTERSTOCK. ALBERT FERREIRA/GETTY IMAGES; SHUTTERSTOCK. S. GRANITZ/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES. MEDIAPUNCH INC/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO.

food was accessible, if overpriced; the experience was novel, if corny. By 1990, how Americans ate out was changing. There had been fast food and fancy restaurants, the kinds of places you'd take a date on a Saturday night. But fast-casual restaurants like Fridays, Olive Garden, and Outback Steakhouse were taking off. Americans had more disposable income; they were up for a dinner out on a Tuesday night. Hard Rock Cafe, which started as a burger place in London in 1971, was thriving as both a restaurant and a source of "eatertainment." Merchandise was flying off the racks.

In other words, America was primed to spend fifteen dollars on chicken fingers and a beer.

A FEW YEARS EARLIER, IN 1987, BRYAN Kestner sat at his desk at the Century City offices of the production company Taft-Barish, flipping through the script of the Flintstones movie, some of which takes place in "Hollyrock," a kind of prehistoric Hollywood. Kestner stopped. Read it again.

This should be a real thing, he thought, *like Hard Rock Cafe, but instead of music it will focus on Hollywood. We'll bring Hollywood to different parts of the world.* Kestner, a handsome twenty-something who had dabbled in modeling, grew up on a farm in Virginia. For him, stars had always been people you saw on a screen, not at the next table. He launched into a near sprint to get to the office of his boss, producer Keith Barish.

"He looked at me like I was from outer space," Kestner says.

Barish's business was film, not restaurants—he produced *Sophie's Choice, The Monster Squad,* and *The Running Man,* among others—but he liked the idea. "This works," he said. For the next year and a half, Barish met with restaurant veterans who could help execute this vision. Working title: Cafe Hollywood. Through New York publicist Bobby Zarem, Barish met Robert Earl, a colorful Englishman known for his loud silk shirts. Earl had become a king of eatertainment with a chain of medieval-themed restaurants and was then the CEO of Hard Rock International.

Celebrities have been putting their names on restaurants for at least a century, starting with Jack Dempsey's in the thirties. In 1990, as Earl and Barish were putting together their plans, Robert De Niro opened the chic Tribeca Grill in Manhattan, though he was mostly discreet about his ownership. Planet Hollywood would be different. The stars weren't incidental. In Barish's view, it would be a Hollywood museum that happened to sell food. But Earl wanted it to be more than that. All they needed were some stars. "With Hard Rock, we were always sort of waiting around dressing rooms after a show to meet the musicians," Earl says. "And I said to this group that I wouldn't do it unless we had celebrity partners for marketing."

Barish hesitated. It was supposed to be Hollywood as a concept, an abstraction. It was supposed to feel like all the glamour and mystique of the film industry in restaurant form. It wasn't supposed to be about specific people. But Earl was the expert, the restaurant man, so Barish trusted him and went with it. Because they didn't have money, they offered shares in the company. Because there were no restaurants yet, the shares had little value.

They needed an action star, someone with appeal in the U.S. and overseas, so they started with a moon shot: Arnold Schwarzenegger, whom Barish had worked with on *The Running Man.* It didn't get much bigger than Schwarzenegger in the late eighties, early nineties. He was hot off *The Terminator* and *Total Recall.* On Valentine's Day, after the actor wrapped a scene for *Terminator 2: Judgment Day,* Barish told him about the plan for a Hollywood restaurant. He accepted immediately. Barish left the set with his first star locked in as Schwarzenegger's family arrived with Valentine's Day balloons for him.

Next up: Bruce Willis. *Die Hard 2* had just earned more than a hundred million dollars worldwide. Willis said yes and offered to play the openings with his blues band, the Accelerators. After that, Barish got a call from Warren Beatty; he was wrapping up *Dick Tracy,* and he was interested in joining up. "Warren Beatty can talk for three hours on the phone," Barish says. "It was a circular conversation. So I never really asked him and he never asked me. It was just a conversation. We might have had two."

Beatty never came aboard. Sylvester Stallone was another story.

"I begged," Stallone told Larry King in 1993. "They saw me outside on my knees saying, 'Please!' "

They had their stars. But they needed a better name.

Barish remembers, "[Earl] said, 'I have a name, but I'm not going to tell you.' He said, 'You have a name?' I said, 'Yeah, I have a name; I'm not going

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Clockwise from left: Arnold Schwarzenegger, Maria Shriver, Elton John, Mr. Freeze, Arnold again, George Clooney, Batman, Sylvester Stallone, and Cindy Crawford.

to tell you.' " As if in a scene from a movie, the two men said the name at the same time: Planet Hollywood.

The months before the Manhattan opening were a frenzy.

Evan Todd, an assistant working with Barish who had no curation experience, was brought in to collect props and costumes to decorate the restaurants. Today, movie memorabilia is close to art–auctioned at prestigious houses like Christie's. But for decades, movie props were thrown out after filming, grabbed by whoever wanted to take them home, or repurposed by the art department for another shoot, leaving them unrecognizable. In the late eighties, people were just starting to pay attention to set castoffs after a pair of ruby slippers from *The Wizard of Oz* sold in 1988 for $165,000. Todd went to the studios to ask for donations–some would only lend items, demanding the right to get them back whenever they wanted. And he bought items that went up for auction, bidding against private collectors. He dug around in musty attics, damp garages, secondhand shops. He found the ships from *Ben-Hur* in the middle of a Nebraska cornfield. The ax Jack Nicholson wielded in *The Shining*, still caked in fake blood, was buried in the back of the garden shed of a guy who worked on the film.

"We asked what he wanted for it," Todd told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1995, "and he said, 'Well, I'll need another ax.' That was an easy deal."

Barish tapped a real estate developer he'd met on a plane, Harry Macklowe, to help find a location. They settled on Fifty-seventh Street, a short walk from Hard Rock. They built a screening room out of blasted rock beneath the building and hired Anton Furst, the Oscar-winning set designer behind Tim Burton's *Batman,* to design the restaurant. Furst thought they were joking. But a tribute to the movies intrigued him, and he signed on with the vision of making it just theme-y enough. His mandate, Furst told Esquire in 1991, was to create "a fun place for the jeans brigade, not upmarket or smart."

They spent months–and $8 million, plus the cost of the screening-room construction–on the Manhattan restaurant. The banquettes were the same color as those at the Beverly Hills Hotel. Palm trees peppered around the dining room recalled southern California. From Grauman's Chinese Theatre they borrowed the idea of collecting handprints from the stars. In spite of the kitsch, they managed to persuade even press-averse actors to get involved. Barish called Jack Nicholson, whom he'd worked with on *Ironweed*.

"Jack does not like to do those kinds of things. I said, 'Jack, just do it.' I said, 'Jack, we'll send someone there with cement,' " Barish says. "He did it."

Oh, yes, and there was a menu to create. "Arnold wanted his mother's strudel recipe," Earl says. "Stallone was always protein driven, and Bruce at the time had more interest, because of his background, in the bar side."

In interviews at the time, it was promised that Schwarzenegger would be in the kitchen cooking Wiener schnitzel. But when the three chiseled men did press for the restaurant, it seemed clear how much the menu was an afterthought. "The day they can reduce a meal to a pill, I'll be happy," Stallone said with a smirk in a 1992 interview with British talk-show host Michael Aspel. "I guess it's from doing a great deal of training or whatever. Maybe it's just genetic; I'm just not prone to chew a lot. It doesn't go with my personality."

Aspel followed up with the obvious question: "None of you fellas is short of a dollar, so why are you doing this?"

"Greed," Stallone, in a Planet Hollywood jacket, answered simply.

Everyone laughed.

"Kidding . . . well, sort of greed . . ." he went on. "It would be fun. And you know, it's nice not to just be making films all the time, to venture out and deal with real people."

PUBLIC-RELATIONS IMPRESARIO BOBBY Zarem, who'd introduced Barish and Earl, masterminded a media frenzy before the doors opened. Zarem, who claims credit for the "I Love New York" campaign, was close with many of the columnists around the city and knew celebrity was the key to coverage. The logo, an electric-blue planet framed with stars and the name of the restaurant emblazoned in cherry red on top, was everywhere in 1991. Zarem delivered Madonna a T-shirt with the restaurant's logo, and she was photographed wear-

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES; MIKE NELSON/GETTY IMAGES; ALBERT FERREIRA/GETTY IMAGES. PAGES 52–53, FROM LEFT: GEORGE ROSE/GETTY IMAGES. THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES. PICTURE ALLIANCE/GETTY IMAGES; PAUL MATALL/IMAGEBROKER/SHUTTERSTOCK.

ing it on a jog. Zarem successfully begged *New York Post* society columnist Aileen Mehle, who wrote under the nom de plume Suzy, to run a shot of *Knots Landing* star Michelle Phillips in the shirt. When New York mayor David Dinkins was in the hospital, Zarem sent a custom Planet Hollywood robe. President George H. W. Bush and First Lady Barbara Bush got robes as well.

When opening night came on October 22, 1991, the city blocked off Fifty-seventh Street except to limo traffic, and the celebrities started rolling in. Elton John arrived in a purple printed suit and a matching hat alongside a bejeweled Donatella Versace. Donald Trump was there in a black turtleneck with date Marla Maples (months after his divorce from his wife Ivana). Chris Farley, Chris Rock, and Christian Slater posed together for photos. There were the designers of the moment: Marc Jacobs, Isaac Mizrahi, Donna Karan. Don Johnson came with his wife, Melanie Griffith, along with Patti D'Arbanville (his ex and the mother of his oldest son, Jesse) and her date. Wesley Snipes, Anna Nicole Smith, Glenn Close, Debbie Gibson, Cher. Kim Basinger, who has spoken about her agoraphobia, bravely faced the crowds outside, then asked Barish if she could spend the rest of the evening in an adjoining hallway. She reunited with her *Blind Date* costar Willis, who, in an oversize gray suit with a matching gray T-shirt, went onstage with the Accelerators, as promised. Just beyond the wall of flashing camera lights, thousands of fans flanking the street screamed with each new arrival. Some stars would make their way over to sign autographs or give high fives. Schwarzenegger tossed T-shirts from the stage.

"It was a madhouse," says former gossip columnist R. Couri Hay. "There were thousands and thousands of people outside. I remember it being worse than Studio 54 that night."

The next day, *The New York Times* rolled out the welcome wagon. "For the last ten years, we had people yammering away about food as art and wagging fingers about diet, and the real, basic truth about food got lost. Food is supposed to be fun," *American Gourmet* coauthor Michael Stern told the *Times* about the Planet Hollywood launch. "There are thousands of people ready to eat peanut butter again. There are millions of people who want to have some fun."

Earl and Barish each look back on those early days a little differently.

"I didn't know if there'd be one or ten restaurants," Barish says. "I certainly never thought it would be a worldwide phenomenon. No one could have planned what it became."

Earl says it was, in fact, exactly what he'd planned. "I always thought it would be the size that it became, because that was my world," he tells me matter-of-factly. "That's all I did, feed people in large numbers—visitors to a city, locals in the city—sell merchandise. I'm made for that business."

Despite the immediate success, cracks showed early—portending what was to come. A few months after the launch, Hard Rock cofounder Peter Morton filed a lawsuit seeking damages against Earl, who was still working for Hard Rock, and the Planet Hollywood chain. Morton accused them of stealing trade secrets and creating a chain similar to Hard Rock "but of substantially lower quality."

At the time, Earl called the lawsuit "a real bloodbath." The case was settled out of court for an undisclosed sum, according to *Vanity Fair,* and today, he tells me, "I'm probably fairly litigious and it would all be in a day's work." He pauses, then adds, "I'm a sicko, so I was probably enjoying it."

ABOUT TWO YEARS AFTER THE MANHATTAN opening, Demi Moore joined Planet Hollywood officially—meaning she received shares in the company. Other celebrities followed. Actors and behind-the-scenes people, like their agents and lawyers, continued to receive shares as an incentive to show up at openings and events. Other perks included private planes and air miles for travel to events. For the Minneapolis opening, Planet Hollywood took over an entire hotel, bought out every interconnecting room, removed all of the hotel's furniture, and made suites. The stars were put up in luxury hotels like the Halkin in London and promised invites to preparties and afterparties.

"The idea of giving options or stock to studio people or to agents was to get their involvement, but at a certain point we didn't have to. We didn't do it anymore, because people were just coming because it was good for them," Barish says.

"They never said we have to show up in so many states, but every one I could, I did," says Tom Arnold, who received shares. "My second wife was on the way back from [an event], and she flew back with George Clooney. He got the call where he found out he was Batman on the plane. . . . He was saying, 'I am Batman.'. . . There were so many celebrities, it became like high school. You got to hang out with the cool kids."

The openings grew more elaborate. Steven Seagal arrived at the one in Vegas on an elephant. Whoopi Goldberg was carried in like Cleopatra. Planet Hollywoods opened in Moscow, Paris, Tel Aviv.

They kept interest up by holding screenings and memorabilia presentations. In Manhattan, the owners hosted a regular Sunday movie night for twenty-five or so VIPs in the downstairs theater. Instead of popcorn, they served carved turkey and roast beef that people balanced on plates while they watched. Once, Prince Edward showed up. "It became a thing. *Let's go to Planet Hollywood and see the movie Sunday night,*" Barish says.

But the real fun happened at the preparties—not at the brightly lit restaurants where the stars were on display. If an opening was near a celebrity's home, they would host a gathering the night before. Prior to the 1994 Miami event, Stallone opened his home to everyone who came in for the occasion. Gloria and Emilio Estefan made arrangements for an enormous paella to be served. Patrick Swayze had the group over to his ranch outside Dallas, where he passed around plates of ribs fresh off the grill.

"It was raucous on the way [to openings]. People were juiced up, man, as they should be. I found that the more the people partied, the friendlier they were to the fans. Some were very friendly," Arnold says. "Then the ride home, people were mostly hungover. They had tons of merchandise, so we'd load the plane up with all their merchandise."

There once was a time, before Instagram stories and reality TV,

when the only place we regular folks saw famous people was in character onscreen, on *Letterman,* or in *People* magazine. They seemed impossibly far away and glamorous. But at Planet Hollywood, they were right there, in person: a supermarket-checkout experience come to life. Instead of reading about celebrities in *Us Weekly* while buying rubbery frozen pizza bread, you could eat that pizza bread and see the stars in real life one table over. It was a living, lowbrow mecca. Stars: They're just like us.

Some of them genuinely seemed to love it. Stevie Wonder was a regular at several locations, and if a group was in for a birthday, he'd join the servers serenading them. But the place never quite nailed the uneasy balance between exclusivity and accessibility, at times swinging from one pole to the other. Studio heads began to complain that Planet Hollywood openings were drawing more stars than their movie screenings. Once the A-listers got past the screaming hordes of fans, only select photographers were allowed inside for the invite-only openings, which gave the stars a sense of security. And though there was no private entrance at any of the restaurants, at the Manhattan location there was a small, tucked-away spot called the Marilyn Room, where celebrities were offered privacy if they wanted it. When Nelson Mandela came by with Danny Glover and Harry Belafonte, that was where they ate. When the typically press-shy Johnny Depp hosted a party with Iggy Pop, who performed at Planet Hollywood at the Cannes film festival, there was no media. The windows were blacked out to deter gawking passersby.

As the nineties went on, the restaurants began opening in smaller and smaller cities. And the flashy Manhattan flagship was starting to become

known more as a tourist spot than a celebrity haunt.

"The openings were a hot ticket. But only on the opening night. Only on the private-screening nights. Only on a specific party night. That was it. And you went to see the stars," says ex-gossip columnist Hay. "It was not El Morocco. It isn't the Stork Club. It isn't Elaine's. It isn't even Cipriani or 21. It wasn't a restaurant where people went to eat. It wasn't Studio 54, where you'd go every night. At midnight, everyone in the world was in the back bar at Studio 54. It was never on my list of drop-bys. It was a photo op. No one's going to start doing lines on the red carpet when you've got *Entertainment Tonight* or *Hard Copy* there."

By 1993, Zarem had left the company. "There was no class still in it. I brought class to it," he says. "That sounds like a very egotistical thing to say, but it's a fact."

"I don't remember it ever having a lot of class," says Hay. "I just remember the food got worse and worse and worse and worse until it really became inedible. And if you were going to go there for an event, you ate before, because you knew you couldn't eat anything."

★

In the mid-nineties, I visited the Orlando Planet Hollywood.

I was around ten. I can recall museum-cased memorabilia above my head—I don't know from which movie. Probably something I wasn't allowed to see. It didn't matter. These were real, actual props from movies. And surely, I imagined, movie stars hung out at this crowded central-Florida restaurant all the time. I begged my parents for a T-shirt, which I held on to for years. At that point, Planet Hollywood merch was highly coveted. "For a friend's son's bar mitzvah, I managed to get Planet Hollywood to sell me one of the official wool-and-leather jackets. They weren't for sale, so it was a huge deal," remembers journalist and author Linda Stasi. "When we gave it to him, people were literally cheering and touching it. The jacket was so rare at the time and Planet Hollywood was so cool that it was like giving a kid a solid-gold Rolex." A vintage Planet Hollywood leather jacket or bomber can go for as little as sixty dollars on eBay today.

Tourists still flooded into the flagship Manhattan restaurant. The wait was always at least twenty minutes. Sometimes it was a couple hours. Patrons complained, yet they waited behind the velvet rope (a nice Hollywood touch) for the chance to sit underneath one of the fifteen jackets Schwarzenegger wore in *The Terminator*—even if Schwarzenegger himself was almost never there. They always asked, though.

"It was incredibly monotonous for us, because there was a hierarchy like there is at any other job," says actress Natalie Zea, who worked as a hostess at the Manhattan Planet Hollywood in 1994. "The servers were superior to us, because they're the ones who got to interact on the occasion when somebody [famous] would come in. There was no real behind-the-scenes. It was just so rote."

On a night when there wasn't an opening or a screening, it was like any other midlevel chain restaurant where families in cutoffs clutching bags of sixteen-dollar T-shirts paid about fifteen dollars a person for pasta with a heavy sauce. The bartender mixed up big, bright, syrupy drinks, then put them on trays to be distributed to the smoking and nonsmoking sections. The same twenty songs played over and over. "Girls on Film" by Duran Duran seemed to always be on.

"My only real memory of [stars coming in] is this blurry vision of a very tall man being kind of swept through as I stand behind the podium thinking, *Oh, he'll see me and be like, 'You, hostess, there. Let me put you in a movie,'*" Zea says. "Which, to be honest, is the only reason any of us worked there."

Down in south Florida, the Miami restaurant-goers were surprised with celebrity cameos from time to time. Stallone bought a home on fourteen acres overlooking Biscayne Bay in 1993 and would stop by the restaurant every few months. Schwarzenegger was there occasionally, too.

"Everybody was coming there, hopeful to run into somebody famous," says restaurateur Darin Rubell, who tended bar at the Coconut Grove outpost in 1993. "It was definitely a big question among the guests. I would say, 'My God, that's crazy. They were just here yesterday. You just missed them.'"

IN APRIL 1996, THE COMPANY went public, trading 22.6 million shares as high as $32.12. It was the busiest day ever for a Nasdaq initial offering. And in 1997, Earl was named one of *Time*'s Most Influential People in America.

"It has great sex appeal. It may not last, though," fund manager Neil Hokanson told the *Los Angeles Times*. "These things always go public when they are at their absolute best and usually get worse from there."

It got worse from there.

"It was a bad year. It was a bad time. It was a mistake," says Barish. "It put unnecessary pressure on the company to grow on a quarterly basis. It was never meant to be that."

There were already Planet Hollywood restaurants in most major cities, so they had to find other ways to expand to meet the demands of being a publicly traded business. There would be retail stores, casinos, hotels—natural progressions of the brand—but Earl also saw Planet Hollywood toys and fragrances and wanted to move past film into different themes, like sports, music, and comic books. He saw the potential for more than three hundred restaurants worldwide. But by the end of 1996, *Vanity Fair* reported that Planet Hollywood's profits for the first half of the year were down to $4 million from $12.7 million the year before. The bottom was falling out.

Copycat restaurants were popping up all around. There was Country Star with Reba McEntire, Clint Black, Vince Gill, and Wynonna Judd. Fashion Cafe, with models Naomi Campbell, Elle Macpherson, and Claudia Schiffer, opened in Rockefeller Center just down the street from the Manhattan Planet Hollywood. Steven Spielberg had Dive!, an underwater-themed restaurant with, yes, gourmet submarine sandwiches. Hulk Hogan had Pastamania! Earl launched his own spin-offs to help with growth

when Planet Hollywood ran out of places to open Planet Hollywoods. There was a sports offshoot, the Official All Star Cafe, with Shaquille O'Neal, Andre Agassi, and Joe Montana. When Tiger Woods made his first public appearance after winning the Masters in 1997, it was at the opening of Myrtle Beach's All Star Cafe. There was also an ice cream chain, Cool Planet, with Whoopi Goldberg. Any cool factor associated with Planet Hollywood was melting. The stock value plummeted, and people just weren't going back to eat. In 1999, *Los Angeles* magazine reported that same-store sales—a critical factor in a restaurant's long-term success—fell by 18 percent the previous year. And the food only seemed to be getting worse.

Schwarzenegger suggested leaning into the merchandise. Inspired by how Tom Ford had transformed Gucci, he told Barish and Earl, "You've got to get a guy like that to design for Planet Hollywood," Schwarzenegger recounted in his memoir. "You need actual Planet Hollywood fashion shows that you can take to Japan, Europe, and the Middle East so that people will want to have the latest Planet Hollywood stuff. Rather than always selling the same old bomber jacket, the bomber jacket should change all the time, with different kinds of buckles and with different kinds of chains hanging off it. If you make the merchandise snappy and hip and the newest of new, you'll see tons of it."

It seemed to Schwarzenegger that Barish and Earl were already overwhelmed. And it was too late for any shiny new buckle or chain to save them.

BARISH STEPPED AWAY FROM THE COMPANY in early 1999. There were reports that his relationship with Earl had soured—a detail neither wants to discuss now. Barish says simply of his leaving, "It was time for me to do something else." And late that year, Planet Hollywood International Inc. declared bankruptcy, calling for the closing of nine of its thirty-two U.S. restaurants and possibly more of its eighty locations worldwide. The bankruptcy inspired gleefully snarky headlines like ROCKY K-O'D and ARNOLD TERMINATED.

The year 2000 started with Schwarzenegger, long the brand's biggest cheerleader, selling his shares. In October 2001, the company filed for bankruptcy again, two years after the first. This time, the company pointed to the downturn in tourism following the September 11 attacks. Planet Hollywood had started the nineties as a flashy, fresh idea. But as the next decade began, it appeared to be over, a relic of a bygone era. In October 2020, the Times Square location's landlord sued the restaurant for about $5 million in unpaid rent. Planet Hollywood denied the allegation and in response filed a counterclaim against the landlord seeking an order from the court regarding the scope of its obligations under the lease guarantee. A rep for the restaurant said, "No comment."

MOST OF THE REMAINING PLANET Hollywoods are still outfitted with memorabilia, which has been updated through the years—though the L.A. airport location has bare walls. The logo got a makeover, but the World Famous Chicken Crunch remains a menu staple. There are now over-the-top milkshakes, the kind that had a moment in the 2010s. One is topped with a piece of cake. As Earl promised in 1996, he's expanded into resorts and casinos. In the former Aladdin resort on the Las Vegas Strip, he opened the Planet Hollywood Resort & Casino in 2007. Three of the four original bold-faced names were there—Stallone, Willis, and Moore—though only Stallone and Willis were investors, according to *The New York Times*.

Britney Spears did her much-hyped, first-ever residency at the resort's AXIS auditorium from 2013 to 2017, and the Orlando restaurant is still going strong, according to Earl. Like the Manhattan location, the London Planet Hollywood has spent the past year closed due to the Covid pandemic. But in January, Earl opened Planet Hollywood Beach Resort Cancun, an all-inclusive resort that includes "the PH Spa, inspired by the Golden Age of Hollywood."

When you look at the promotional materials for Planet Hollywood today, the action stars have been replaced by food personality Guy Fieri. And in talking to Earl, you'd never know of the chain's late-nineties implosion. When I ask what it was like for him when two faces of the brand stepped away, he says, "When you say some of the stars stepped away . . . Bruce and Sly stayed with me all the way, still."

A rep for Stallone says, "Contrary to the assertion by Robert Earl, Mr. Stallone is no longer involved with Planet Hollywood." (Stallone and Willis, who were effusive in their enthusiasm for Planet Hollywood throughout the nineties and during the Vegas opening in 2007, declined to be interviewed for this piece. A rep for Willis never responded to my inquiry about the actor's current involvement with the brand. A rep for Schwarzenegger didn't respond to multiple inquiries.)

Now, three decades after that flashy Fifty-seventh Street grand opening, Earl says he wouldn't change a thing. "I'll tell you, not a regret, because we're doing fantastic now that we've transitioned, as you know, into gaming and hotels," he says. "But I've always thought, *Oh my God, if social media had been around when we launched. . .*"

Earl cuts the call short—he has a meeting for his son's new venture, a restaurant in Los Angeles at the intersection of Hollywood and Vine. "For me, one of the interesting ends to the story is my son is now doing his version of it," he says. "Arnold, Bruce, and Sly have been replaced by a series of new digital influencers with millions upon millions of followers."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DAVE BENETT/GETTY IMAGES; BARRY KING/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; BARRY KING/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO.

Sly, Whoopi Goldberg, and Steven Seagal arrive in style at the Las Vegas Planet Hollywood opening in 1994.

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OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP
IRWIN
NICKLAUS
GRAHAM
WATSON
NELSON
ZOELLER
FLOYD
STRANGE
STRANGE
STEWART
1992-TOM KITE
1995-LEE JANZEN
1994-ERNIE ELS
1995-CORY PAVIN
1996-STEVE JONES
1997-ERNIE ELS
1998-LEE JANZEN
1999-PAYNE STEWART
2000-TIGER WOODS
2001-RETIEF GOOSEN
2002-TIGER WOODS
2003-JIM FURYK
2004-RETIEF GOOSEN
2005-MICHAEL CAMPBELL
2006-GEOFF OGILVY
2007-ANGEL CABRERA
2008-TIGER WOODS
2009-LUCAS GLOVER
2010-GRAEME MCDOWELL
2011-RORY MCILROY
2012-WEBB SIMPSON
2013-JUSTIN ROSE
2014-MARTIN KAYMER
2015-JORDAN SPIETH
2016-DUSTIN JOHNSON
2017-BROOKS KOEPKA
ESTº 1846
Dewar's
BLENDED SCOTCH WHISKY
AGED 15 YEARS
The Monarch
TRUE SCOTCH
PRODUCT OF SCOTLAND
John Dewar & Sons Ltd
PERTHSHIRE, SCOTLAND
SPECIAL RESERVE BLEND
John Dewar
FOUNDER

A new generation of players is redefining golf culture, including its dress code. See page 66 for more of the chromatic attire you'll want to wear as much off the course as on it.

GOLF

it's tee time in America

Golf is back. On the following pages, seven things we're loving about the new golden era.

photograph by BJORN IOOSS

WELCOME TO the *Golfaissance*

by BEN BOSKOVICH

THERE HAVE BEEN PLENTY OF REASONS TO ABANDON golf. The lofty standards and arcane etiquette. The frumpy snob on the first tee box, cell phone clipped to his belt under an offensively patterned polo shirt—an obnoxious sign that the electricity Tiger Woods brought to the game was all but gone. A few years ago, the headlines began rolling in: American golf was dying a slow death. Fewer people were taking up the sport. Equipment sales and TV ratings were way down. The pro circuit lacked star power. Country clubs faced an existential crisis.

But this isn't an obituary.

While the critics wrote their eulogies, a new generation of golfers emerged. Younger and more diverse. Postcollegiate bros traded backyard bashes for 6:00 A.M. tee times. Golf meme accounts took over Instagram. The fashion evolved. Nike added spikes to the Air Jordan I, V, and XI. The apparel adopted a streetwear sensibility. (See: the introduction of the golf hoodie.) Suddenly, Mister Belt Clip had company.

And that was before the pandemic. Around the time social distancing became a thing, when we were growing exhausted by focaccia and FaceTime, Americans got out their clubs and teed up in a surge not seen since 1997, when Woods first appeared on the scene, according to the National Golf Foundation. It makes sense: In a year filled with sameness and solitude, golf has offered an escape from both. Stand on a dewy fairway just after sunrise. Watch the fog rise above the tree line; put your phone and your mind on silent. The only agenda is getting the ball in the air. You feel liberated.

Today, we're in the middle of a golfaissance.

Even better: Amid the largest social-justice movement in this century, progressive golf fans—we exist!—are reexamining our relationship with the sport. We recognize that golf has no future if it is to lean on the wealthy, white privilege on which it was built; the only way forward is through accessibility, hospitality, and investment that benefits disenfranchised communities. Without such change, the sport doesn't stand a chance. But if the gatekeepers—the PGA, the private clubs, the USGA—take action, golf will have the opportunity to thrive.

Those who never fell out of love with the game in the first place, who know its potential and have hoped for its survival, have an opportunity, too: to revel in this moment; to proselytize golf's evolution to whoever will listen; to help ensure those obits, and not the sport, turn to dust. Golf is finally cool again. Wouldn't it be nice if, this time, it lasted?

THE NEW RULES OF GOLF

Rule No. *189:* If you need to publicly urinate on the course, there must be four club lengths between you and your playing partners. Also, bushes.

1

johnny manziel IS GIVING *hope* TO ALL *the* HACKERS

by **BRADY LANGMANN**

JOHNNY GOLF DOESN'T LOSE MANY BALLS. HE PLAYS in the desert: dry air, wide fairways, few hazards. He can make every birdie putt. Wanna bet? *Plunk!* Johnny wins, and he'd like to see the Benjamin, now. He pulls a beer out of his bag—he's chugging, not sipping—then on to the next birdie. You see, when Johnny Golf lines up a shot, there's this feeling in his hands. It's the same one he felt in a helmet and pads—the rush of third and fifteen, when he saw the fingertips of a wide receiver from thirty yards away. Back then, he was Johnny Football, depressed and angry. That guy is gone.

"I got to live my dream at twenty-four years old," he says. "Now, I got to a point where I was like, *What do I want to do next?*"

Johnny Manziel plays golf now. Once upon a Friday night light, he was the baddest guy in sports: Texas-raised, baptized in beer, winner of the Heisman Trophy in 2012 while playing for Texas A&M, first-round pick of the Cleveland Browns. He'd throw for 372 yards, score five touchdowns, three passing, two rushing.

"GOLF HAS BROUGHT ME *freedom.* GOLF HAS BROUGHT ME *peace.*"

NFL quarterbacking was phase one of Manziel's career. Phase two: pro golf.

COTY TARR (MANZIEL)

Then he fell: arrests, two of 'em, booted from Cleveland to Canada to home. No football, no life. In 2021, five years after his last NFL snap, Manziel, twenty-eight, is more of a cautionary tale than a household name. All to say: When he pops up on Zoom–big smile, backward hat, polo shirt the color of the sky–he looks like a new person.

"What's up, my man?"

Man, bro, buddy, dude, let me tell you: There's something different about Johnny Manziel. The guy is glowing. Or, as he would say: The vibe is different. "My life is tailored right now around fun and chasing happiness," he says. "I'm surprised when I find myself really smiling, because I'm still learning how to get used to the positive things in my life." In February, on retired NFL lineman Chris Long's podcast, Manziel said he's giving himself twelve years to make it onto the PGA Tour, a dream that, if realized, would see him beat the roughly one-in-seventeen-thousand odds a golfer has of going pro. What amateur golfer hasn't had that fantasy? *If only I had the time, the money, the connections.* Manziel's got all that. And he's beaten tough odds before–high school footballers have about a one-in-thirteen-hundred chance of making it to the NFL. "Golf has brought me freedom," he says. "Golf has brought me peace. And golf has brought competition back into my life."

A year ago, Manziel was in Texas: recently divorced, not far removed from a bipolar disorder diagnosis. His football career was dead, but he was still recognized everywhere. He was begging for a new place to go. New friends, fresh start. His buddy invited him to the Waste Management Phoenix Open. Even bought his plane ticket. Manziel had a blast. Ran into another buddy, who asked if he wanted to play a round the next day. He did. Met his second buddy's buddies, who also play. And those buddies' buddies, who play, too.

All of a sudden, he's moving to Scottsdale, one of America's golf meccas, due to its climate and abundance of courses. He's playing eighteen holes, five days a week, with a brotherhood of desert golfers. He shoots eight over par, then six, four, three, two, one, even. He practices with PGA pros Jon Rahm and Tony Finau. He's good. His confidence returns.

But it's not just that. Manziel is growing up. "I slowly started watching myself over a three-month period this spring," he says. "If we went out, drank, stayed up too late, or didn't feel like waking up, and had an eight o'clock tee time? I have not missed one single day of getting to the course and playing golf. If that was football, I can think of ten instances where I overslept and didn't get out of bed to work out or go to practice. Every single day, no matter how bad I feel, I get my golf clubs, throw my shit on, and go play. And I love it."

On the course, Johnny is just Johnny. Not an Aggies or Browns QB. Between the tee and the green, it's Johnny versus this hole, not Johnny versus the world. Johnny Football loved to take the ball himself and rush for the first. Johnny Golf is damn near giddy when he shanks the ball into the woods, because he knows he can chip his way out of it.

Say Manziel does make it to the Tour. You'd have to think it'd look a lot like his favorite movie, *Happy Gilmore*. Swagger personified turns those polite golf claps into a full-blown rager. Sends Bob Barker onto his ass? No. Chucks a putter? Maybe. Wins? Damn right he wins. He's Johnny Golf. Is Manziel ready to compete on golf's biggest stage?

Manziel takes off his hat, rubs his head, changes the subject. He's not ready to imagine his name on the *SportsCenter* ticker again. For now, he'd like to play in a couple celebrity tournaments, keep touring the United States of Golf, see what happens. He's made peace with the fuck-ups of his twenty-two-year-old self, transplanted himself to this unholy desert, converted to a new tribe, a new creed. Born of that, for the first time in years, was a shred of happiness–which Manziel wants to protect. "For a long time, I didn't ever think I would have good, sunny days again. I was such a negative person because I wasn't an NFL quarterback anymore," he says. "This has freed me of that and given me life again."

A few weeks into his new life in Scottsdale, the first night demasking in public was allowed, Johnny Golf walked into a bar. The scene was too chaotic, so he found a new place. He sat down; finally he could breathe. He got a tap on the shoulder. "Hey, man, Johnny Manziel?" Yeah. The stranger sat down. Started talking about the day Johnny Manziel became Johnny Football, Texas A&M versus Alabama, 345 total yards, two touchdowns. The guy said he'd heard the results from his dad–"WE BEAT ALABAMA!"–and that the memory stuck with both father and son. "Man, that moment is still something we talk about," he told Manziel.

This guy was just a guy. Not a gamer, or a gawker, not one of the famous friends from his past life, from the days he couldn't get out of bed. They kept talking. At one point, "I just looked at him," Manziel recalls, "and I'm like, 'Do I have anything to be ashamed of?' "

"You lived your life that you wanted to live," the man replied. Manziel gave him his number. They made plans to grab lunch. Maybe they'll even play golf.

2

THERE ARE GOLF BUDDIES (AND FRENEMIES) TO BE MADE

An incomplete taxonomy of golfers

INSPECTOR GADGET
This tech wiz spares no gadget. Rangefinder, cigar holder, GPS watch, TrackMan, alignment sticks, ball retriever: He's well prepared. Now he just needs a lesson.

THE CAVEMAN
He rolls up seconds before his tee time. Skips the driving range and the pleasantries. Marks his ball with a bottle cap from a sixer he downed on the front nine. His punch shot? Stunning.

THE INFLUENCER
Woe be to the group playing behind him, because he just has to get that content on every hole. The worst part: He's getting paid to ruin your day.

Rule No. *410:* The golf gods put a birdie in your bank for every ball mark you fix. There is no penalty for abstaining; you're just an ass.

3

EVERYONE *wants one of* scotty cameron's FLAT STICKS

by DANIEL DUMAS

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOLFER AND PUTTER MIGHT be the most intimate, emotional, downright spiritual in all of sports. Save for the rare hole-in-one, it's the only club you use on every hole. The one you use to seal a victory, or score an all-time low. Scotty Cameron understands this better than anyone. After all, he makes golf's holiest grails.

Cameron's sleek, sexy, handcrafted stainless-steel putters are revered by golfers at every skill level. Gaze at one in all its contoured glory and you're compelled to pick it up. "When you are introduced to a new putter and it speaks to you, you have a bond," says Cameron, who swears "the greats" treat their putters like their friends. "I believe you talk with it."

For Cameron, fifty-eight, feel is everything. He says it constantly. *Feel*. Of course, he shows his team—guys who forge horseshoes and work on cars; they aren't golfers—how a putter should look. Feel is something else. It lives not in a putter or a golfer but in the moment you wrap your hand around the grip, feeling the weight of the head, feeling the knock of the ball. You can feel when you push a putt outward, or pull one inward, or hit the sweet spot squarely.

The best golfers in the world kneel at the altar of feel. And they take it to the bank. In April, Hideki Matsuyama tapped in a two-footer on the 18th at Augusta to clinch the 85th Masters Tournament and become the first Japanese man to win a major. His putter? A Scotty Cameron Newport 2 Tour Prototype. One month prior, Justin Thomas, currently the number-two player worldwide, won the Players Championship aided by Cameron's Phantom TX 5.5 mallet. On the secondary market, bidding wars over Cameron's archival pieces can become as competitive as a PGA Tour event. Last September, a Newport 2 customized for Tiger Woods (who won all of his fifteen majors with a Scotty) was sold at auction for a stupefying $154,928.

These days, Cameron does his work at a compound in San Marcos, California. But as a kid, he learned principles of club design and craftsmanship in the workshop of his golf-obsessed father, a two-handicapper who died when Cameron was thirteen. In the late eighties, the younger Cameron launched his own business in his garage, crafting putters for major manufacturers like Maxfli and Cleveland. His breakthrough came in 1993, when Bernhard Langer used Cameron's Classic I to win the Masters. The next year, Cameron inked a deal with the company that owns Titleist to make its putters exclusively.

Still, sometimes he's nostalgic for those early days, when golfers would casually drop into his workshop. Or before that, when his dad was teaching him the spiritual side of design. "I loved putters, but he instilled into me design and feel," he says. "I'll buy a hammer and it feels so good in my hand. I think, *How can I re-create the feel from this hammer in a putter grip?*" Cameron remembers his dad constantly asking him, "What does it make you feel?"

A few years back, he wrote down a reminder. "Make me feel."

Cameron (bottom) designs affordable off-the-shelf putters. But it's the models he customizes, such as the 009 (below), that have earned him a loyal following among some of the best pro golfers.

4

THERE'S A BETTER WAY TO *drink* ON THE GOLF COURSE

GOLF

Serious golfers rarely imbibe midround. Good for them. The rest of us? A drink or four on the back nine can be essential. If you've four-putted every green, and it's only the fifth hole, a cold one before the turn is in order. Hell, it might loosen up your swing.

There are some common tricks to drinking while swinging: Don't get wasted; nothing wrong with an ice-cold light beer; the Transfusion—a vodka, ginger ale, and grape juice—is a delicious choice. Here's a new one: Embrace hard seltzers. Sure, they're synonymous with spring-break chug huts, but they hit the perfect combination of ABV enlightenment and hydration without dropping a calorie bomb on you—they all clock in at around 100 calories.

If you'd rather avoid pulling a White Claw from your bag, try Crook & Marker, especially the iced tea. Want something more akin to a craft cocktail? Go with Amass Botanic Hard Seltzers; the Surfer Rosso is a balance of tart and spicy from hibiscus, citrus, ginger, clove, and turmeric.

Spiked seltzers may be the drinking equivalent of Muzak, but for the less talented among us, golf is a Muzak kind of sport—a background activity to get us outside shooting the shit with pals. The real drinking begins on the 19th hole.

—Kevin Sintumuang

THIS PAGE: ACUSHNET GOLF (CAMERON, PUTTER); OPPOSITE: SAM GREENWOOD/GETTY IMAGES (JOHNSON)

Rule No. *247:* There is an 87.4 percent chance someone in your group will complain that TV cameras give pros an unfair advantage; 97

Along with the struggles common to all golfers, Johnson has faced—and overcome—countless instances of racial discrimination.

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KAMAiU JOHNSON is PUTTING the SPORT on his SHOULDERS

"Golf has to look like America, or golf goes under."

As told to MADISON VAIN

The way Kamaiu Johnson found golf is a signal of where the game must go to survive. Johnson—twenty-seven and still working toward a spot on the PGA Tour—is proof that a Black kid from rural north Florida has as much a place in this sport as anybody. But Johnson knows talk is cheap and golf isn't. That's why, amid his pursuit of golf's biggest stage, he started a foundation in his name to help give access to kids like him. Kids whose love of the game should be the only prerequisite for admission beyond its gates, and who can channel his story into their own success.

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT MY LIFE STORY looks like if I don't play golf. Growing up, most of my friends were wealthy; they had both parents in their household. I knew that I had to do something that was going to change my life, my family's life, and change everything around me.

One day, I'm fourteen years old, and I'm outside my grandma's apartment complex swinging a stick, and a lady named Jan Auger came across the fairway. She was a GM of the nearby club and could have said I was trespassing. Instead, she said, "You can go to the driving range and hit some balls." She gave me a nine iron and a bucket of balls, and that's how I got introduced to the game of golf.

When I found golf, I found a community that was willing to see a kid that was a hard worker, that didn't have everything given to him. It made me want to wake up early in the morning, no matter what I was going through at home. It made me want to be someone. It showed me the golfing industry; it showed me racism. It also showed me that there are really great people out here in the world.

I could only play a tournament here and there because it was very expensive. I would sleep on my friends' couches, drove my friends' cars, and called around asking people for money to support my dream. I never really told people how bad it was. I didn't want to make excuses for myself. I just wanted to get to a point where I could tell my story and not have people feel pity for me.

I had some real come-to-Jesus moments in my life. *Don't go off on this person. Don't tell this person how you really feel.* I was given an exemption for the Farmers Insurance Open. The first day, I go into the players' area; the first question I'm asked: "Who are you caddying for this week?" Bay Hill, the first question: "Who are you caddying for?" Honda Classic, the first question: "Who are you caddying for?" Being a Black male in America, you always have to wear the mask. One wrong move can ruin your whole life. I'll never put myself in a position to ruin my purpose, because it's bigger than me. It's bigger than golf. It's about inspiring my community and getting my community involved in golf. The golf industry has so far to go.

I was playing with some white men at the Seminole Pro-Member, and they go, "The problem in the Black community is Black men don't know how to have a kid by a person and stay with that person and make a family and make that woman their wife." I go back to Tallahassee and I'm telling this story to my friends—five Black men—and we're all pretty successful. But none of us grew up with dads. It was like, Man, that's kind of true. So we have to continue to wear the mask. Until we get to a point in our lives that we're so successful that we can give back and change the narrative on Black males.

I do think that golf is moving in the right direction. It doesn't have a choice. Before Covid-19, golf wasn't growing. Golf has to look like America, or golf goes under. And I don't think the white man wants golf to go under. It's a lot of pressure, but somebody has got to do it."

percent of the time it will be because they lost their ball. They are correct. **Rule No. *620:*** In regard to using your Bluetooth speaker on the

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golf's DRESS CODE *has* (FINALLY) BEEN DISRUPTED

For *too long*, golf's preferred on-course attire was a little cringey. But with an INFLUX of young, fashion-forward golfers—and with the support of some *heavy-hitting brands* that have joined the cause—the FUTURE OF GOLF STYLE is looking mighty sharp.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BJORN IOOSS

STYLING BY GEORGE McCRACKEN

course, please, just avoid the AM sports talk. **Rule No. *73:*** Snacks at the turn, ranked in ascending order of performance enhancement:

THIS PAGE, ON ERIK ANDERS LANG: POLO ($145) BY **LACOSTE;** SHIRT BY **RANDOM GOLF CLUB;** TROUSERS ($1,075) BY **BRUNELLO CUCINELLI;** SNEAKERS ($630) BY **GUCCI;** HAT ($42) BY **MALBON GOLF;** SUNGLASSES ($360) BY **GARRETT LEIGHT CALIFORNIA OPTICAL.** OPPOSITE, ON TAYLOR JOHNSON: POLO ($195) BY **EMPORIO ARMANI;** HAT ($35) BY **RANDOM GOLF CLUB;** BALL BY **RANDOM GOLF CLUB X VICE.**

protein bar, hot dog, two beers, chicken salad sandwich wrapped in plastic from the cooler. **Rule No. *388:*** The length of one's pre-shot

routine is inversely proportional to one's skill level. **Rule No. *270:*** Common poor-golf-shot excuses ranked in descending order of truth:

GOLF

OPPOSITE, ON LANG: JACKET ($1,295), POLO ($545), AND TRACK PANTS ($995) BY **BRUNELLO CUCINELLI;** SNEAKERS BY **RANDOM GOLF CLUB X TOMO;** SUNGLASSES ($160), **EYEWEAR BY DAVID BECKHAM.** THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT, ON JOHNSON: SWEATSHIRT ($298), POLO ($99), AND TROUSERS ($115) BY **RLX GOLF;** HAT ($45) BY **POLO RALPH LAUREN;** CARRY BAG ($175) BY **JONES X RANDOM GOLF CLUB;** HEAD COVER ($75 FOR THE SET) AND TOWEL ($25) BY **RANDOM GOLF CLUB.** ON LANG: SHIRT ($670), T-SHIRT ($560), AND TROUSERS ($1,025) BY **HERMÈS;** SNEAKERS ($150) BY **COLE HAAN;** HAT ($45) BY **MALBON GOLF;** SUNGLASSES ($390) BY **GARRETT LEIGHT CALIFORNIA OPTICAL;** M2 SEVEN SEAS WATCH ($1,900) BY **TUTIMA.** ON ROYCE RYU: JACKET ($1,310), POLO ($375), AND TROUSERS ($470) BY **CANALI;** SNEAKERS ($150) BY **COLE HAAN.**

"If the group in front of us would play faster, I'd be loose." "Of course the wind picks up right when I'm hitting." "That honestly never

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the score is no longer THE POINT

GOLF'S NEW WAVE STARTS from inside the hearts and minds of those who play it, but it extends to the clothes they wear and the company they keep. **Erik Anders Lang** (opposite), forty, founded Random Golf Club, an online and IRL community that seeks to connect people on the course, on a simple belief: All are welcome. "I want to incentivize you to bring someone who hasn't played," Lang says. "It's an open-mindedness that's not often seen on a golf course. There's a pass/fail scenario where we leave the game better than we found it. That's a key factor in what Random Golf Club is: a new way of playing that focuses on inclusivity." Lang's operation is a direct reflection of the change that's taking place in the sport. There's a reason Lang and his golf buddies **Taylor Johnson, Trevor James Vick,** and **Royce Ryu** look so at home wearing golf's new style—which borrows inspo from today's streetwear and the vintage on-course looks of the fifties and seventies: because they believe in the rebellious spirit it represents. —B. B.

THIS PAGE, ABOVE, ON TREVOR JAMES VICK: JACKET ($670) BY **HERNO;** POLO ($118) BY **BOSS;** SUNGLASSES ($184) BY **RAY-BAN;** HAT ($45) BY **MALBON GOLF.** RIGHT: SHIRT ($100) AND TROUSERS ($120) BY **BOGEY BOYS.** OPPOSITE, ON LANG: POLO ($690) AND TROUSERS ($1,290) BY **GUCCI;** STAN SMITH GOLF SNEAKERS ($120) BY **ADIDAS;** SUNGLASSES ($420) BY **GARRETT LEIGHT CALIFORNIA OPTICAL.**

happens." "These clubs suck." **Rule No. *443:*** The guy who's offended by golf hoodies will be wearing oversize plaid cargo shorts.

Rule No. *115:* Leave the woman driving the beverage cart alone. **Rule No. *909:*** If you live on a golf course and don't sneak on at night

THIS PAGE, LEFT, ON LANG: SWEATSHIRT, T-SHIRT ($40), HAT ($35), AND WOODEN TEE BY **RANDOM GOLF CLUB.** ABOVE: POLO ($1,250) BY **DIOR MEN.** OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT, ON JOHNSON: POLO ($1,115) BY **MISSONI;** SWEATSHORTS ($98) BY **MALBON GOLF;** AIR MAX 90 G NRG SNEAKERS ($150) BY **NIKE;** HAT BY **MANORS.** ON VICK: POLO ($89) AND TROUSERS ($129) BY **BONOBOS;** HAT ($42) BY **MALBON GOLF;** SHOES ($170) BY **COLE HAAN;** SUNGLASSES ($420) BY **GARRETT LEIGHT CALIFORNIA OPTICAL.**

to putt, you've missed the point. **Rule No. *251:*** He who marks his ball with a quarter receives double the style points of he who does

FOR STORE INFORMATION SEE PAGE 102. PRODUCTION: JOE DALEY/A+PRODUCTIONS. GROOMING: BRENT LAVETT/THE WALL GROUP.

so with a poker chip. **Rule No. *667:*** If you lie about your score, among the company you keep is Donald J. Trump. Think about that.

immortal

At fifty-six, already decades into an A-list career,
Chris Rock is rebooting the *Saw* franchise.
He nailed the fourth season of *Fargo*.
He's directing again.
He's writing more jokes.
The man might just be trying to live forever.

BY MITCHELL S. JACKSON __ PHOTOGRAPHS BY DARIO CALMESE

This page: Jacket, shirt, and trousers by **Paul Smith;** hat by **Hermès.** Opposite: Shirt and trousers by **Prada;** sunglasses by **Jacques Marie Mage;** bracelet by **John Hardy.**

HE STOPS ON A PEDESTRIAN ISLAND TO LET TRAFFIC PASS on Houston Street, and in that brief wait, I wonder if the people in the trundling cars spy one of the most famous comedians on earth under his mask and transition-lens glasses. No one, though, drops the window to shout his name or honk or jab an index in astonishment—Chris Rock granted a reprieve from living famous 24/7/365. Rock, who's dressed casual in a hoodie and cargo pants and white Reebok Classic trainers, troops a half step ahead of me, a Tumi backpack slung over a shoulder.

We turn past a multitude of preschoolers enjoying the recess of their lives inside a fenced-in ball field and amble on up MacDougal. He slows his gait a bit. "The thing about this block is: It's where Cosby worked. It's where Joan Rivers worked. It's where Woody Allen worked. It's where Mort Sahl worked. All these motherfuckers," says Rock. "It's where Bob Dylan worked. Where Jimi Hendrix worked. You know what I mean? It's kind of a mecca for pushing it."

The street is narrow in normal times, but with the New York City Covid protocols for indoor dining, it takes careful maneuvering to avoid smacking, with our backpacks, people palavering at outdoor tables.

We stop outside the Comedy Cellar, the club that sits down a few scuffed steps from street level. A helluva lot of feet have walked down these steps and onto the stage inside, most on their way to nowhere, a few on their way to a career, and a tiny handful on their way to being remembered.

A poster with pictures of some of the memorable ones hangs on the wall. Rock scans the rows.

Let's see: There's Dave Chappelle, Bill Burr, Robin Williams.

You can't see his mouth under his mask. Is he smiling? Pursing his lips to focus?

Wanda Sykes, Colin Quinn.

(Funny thing: When Rock needed a comedy club for a scene in his 2014 movie *Top Five*—which he wrote, directed, and starred in—he chose this very establishment, its name ever lit up in the round yellow bulbs of a Broadway marquee. The character he wrote for himself? A comedian who tries to transition to being a serious actor.)

Rock calls out the names of comedians I've never heard of. "Some of them, they're not famous, but you know, they're like great session musicians," he explains. "Like all the musicians know this motherfucker can play some *bass*. You get five legends in the room and they're all talking about this motherfucker you never heard of."

He scans.

"And there you go," I say, pointing at Rock's photo, as if I've found Waldo.

The man earned his first acting credit in 1987 after Eddie Murphy caught his set at the Comic Strip (another New York institution) and cast him in *Beverly Hills Cop II*. Then boom: *Saturday Night Live* and *In Living Color*. Six comedy specials. A whole-ass sitcom based on his life. An HBO talk show. (That joint won an Emmy.) Starring role in an acclaimed Broadway play. Twice the Oscars host. Forty-something movies. Five billion dollars at the box office, if you add it all up.

An incontrovertible A-list résumé.

But…

This slim dude with the knowing eyes and the knife-sharp wit has somehow, at fifty-six, arrived at the belief that his place in the universe—of Black comedy, of comedy itself, of acting, of artistry, of *defining the times in which he lives*—is not quite set yet. That he must create more, more, more; that what he makes must be different, more challenging, and better, greater, superior.

Peep: In the past three years alone, he directed this year's stand-up special *Chris Rock Total Blackout*—maybe his best ever—an extended cut of his 2018 special *Tamborine*. He anchored season 4 of the Emmy-winning crime drama *Fargo,* a shock to maybe everyone but him. Another shock: his starring role in *Spiral: From the Book of Saw,* the just-released ninth installment of the *Saw* horror franchise. Then there's his role in the untitled, mum's-the-word David O. Russell film starring just about every A-list actor in Hollywood.

There's the finished script of the next film he'll direct.

There's the nascent material for his next comedy special.

On these steps, playing Where's Chris on the poster, the same steps he shuffled down for the first time thirty-seven years ago, you think about how a comedian, an actor, a writer—any serious artist, which is what he is—must resist the temptation to marvel too long at what they've made, must instead meet the constant challenge of equaling if not surpassing it. Must answer again and again the crucial questions echoing evermore in the mind:

Does what I make matter?

And, by extension, do I?

Will I be remembered the next century?

Here's a little secret: Part of Rock's productivity has been keeping a journal handy for more than thirty-five years. "You read it over, and you're like, *Oh, that's good for stand-up.* Or *Oh, that would be good for script,"* he says in that inimitable voice of his. "And then there's some other shit, you're like, *Oh, when I die, provided I don't fuck up my career, people are going to think this shit's really interesting."*

Now, what does it say about Chris Rock that he's meticulous about recording his thoughts, on account of a part of him believes that he—that Chris motherfucking Rock—hasn't yet made the mark he wishes to make on the world?

And what, goddamnyoume, does it say about the rest of us?

"When it's time to get a divorce, women got it made.… 'Your Honor… I'm used to this, I'm used to that, I'm accustomed to this.' Yo, what the fuck is accustomed*?… You go to a restaurant, you're accustomed to eat. You leave? You ain't eating no more! They don't owe you a steak."* —Bring the Pain, 1996

"I HAVE THIS BELIEF: ALWAYS EAT BEFORE A MEETING. Even a lunch meeting," he says.

Ours are the only two Black faces in the hotel-lobby restaurant. He was sitting alone when I walked in.

"Because you don't eat during the meeting?" I ask.

"Because hungry people say dumb shit. Because hungry people say things they regret."

So we get food. We talk a little about family. Like:

As part of a pact they made together, Rock got a Basquiat-inspired tattoo, on his left deltoid, with his eighteen-year-old daughter, Lola, last year, his oldest. By way of commiserating, I mention my oldest is also a daughter and nineteen, and that I have a portrait of her tattooed on my arm. And for a moment, we're a mini girldad summit discussing, at bottom, the truth of being fathers to girls who, in too few beats of our naked hearts, have effloresced into young women.

It's one thing to make art while your children are young and/or not its target audience.

It's another thing to create when your kids are old enough to engage with what you make, are knowing enough to critique it.

It's yet another to make work in a universe in which they're also aware of prime examples of other art, can judge where your work ranks among that of your peers. And trust, don't no self-respecting artist-dad want to make something his kids don't respect. Or worse, something that pains them.

Rock recalls couple of years ago, he got a call to be in Lil Nas X's video for "Old Town Road." At the time, he had no idea who the hell Lil Nas X was, but he asked his youngest daughter and she implored him to say yes. "I have a focus group in my house," he says. "I definitely run things by them. My

Jacket, vest, shirt,
and trousers by **Gucci.**

From left: Jacket and shirt by **Dior Men;** sunglasses, **Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello.** Shirt and trousers by **Gucci.**

It took almost one hundred years after the CIVIL WAR (in which Rock's great-great-grandfather

daughters are all about 'You got to stay relevant.' They want me to work with relevant people."

Tamborine was the first special he made since his two daughters—Zahra is seventeen—were little girls, also the first since he and their mother divorced after eighteen years of marriage. And those two topics are a crucial part of the show's impact. Says the writer and producer Nelson George, one of Rock's closest friends (they first worked together on the 1993 hip-hop parody *CB4*): "He named it *Tamborine,* the same as the Prince song—I think it speaks to mortality. Prince is one of Chris's biggest heroes. And dude is gone. So the show is also reckoning with, you know, that there's an end point to this shit."

Tamborine might also be Rock at his most vulnerable on the stand-up stage, a contrast to the special of his that I've watched most, *Bigger & Blacker* (1999). That one begins with Rock swaggering onto the stage of the Apollo Theater in a black leather suit, his hair sheened, his ears aglint with diamond studs.

Believe me when I tell you, the Rock of *Bigger & Blacker* ain't worried about a career end point.

"*Bring the Pain* changed my life," says Rock of the 1996 special that thrust him mainstream. "The Oprah show, *60 Minutes*. But you know, like Whitney Houston, there was a little bit of grumbling. Like, 'White people like him too much.' So it was like, *I'll show you motherfuckers. I'm going to play the Apollo. This is going to be bigger and blacker.*" (It was taped the same year as the Columbine school shooting and opens with a long bit about shootings in largely white schools. "When I's a kid, they used to *separate* the crazy kids from everybody. When I's a kid, the crazy kids went to school in a little-ass bus, they had a class at the end of the school, and they used to get out of school at 2:30—*just in case* they went crazy, they would only hurt other crazy kids! And we was all safe. But now the world is coming to an end! You're gonna have little white kids saying, 'I wanna go to a Black school where it's safe!' ")

If I hadn't seen *Bigger & Blacker* umpteen times, I'd question whether that kind of bravado could exist in the dude sitting across from me now picking over his eggs, a man whose thick brows and midday stubble are flecked with gray. "Comedians or artists, whatever, you do this thing which naturally puts you on a stage. So you're always a little higher than the audience," says Rock, gesturing. "But the better the performance, the lower the stage gets."

Rock's friend Maya Rudolph recalls dining with him and some friends during his preparation for one of the Oscars shows. Near the end of dinner, Rock announced he was headed to the Comedy Store to do a set. "The reason why I bring that story up is because Chris went from being the guy at dinner to the guy saying, 'We're going to go do this' to the guy walking in and doing that thing. He's obviously performing, but it's the same shit he told you ten minutes ago, before he went onstage. And it's very interesting to watch someone who knows the weight and the gravity of what they're saying—that what they're saying is good enough for you across the table at a restaurant, or millions of people watching at home, in the exact same breath and exact same way."

"You don't need no gun control. You know what you need? We need some bullet control. . . . I think all bullets should cost five thousand dollars. . . . You know why? 'Cause if a bullet cost five thousand dollars, there'd be no more innocent bystanders." —Bigger & Blacker, 1999

ONE OF THE FUNNIEST HUMANS OF ALL TIME HAS A HABIT OF touching a cupped hand to his face in contemplation for what can seem like long minutes. "Comedy's a deadly serious business," says Lorne Michaels, *Saturday Night Live* creator and comedy kingmaker. "And Chris is a thinker."

At one point during lunch, Rock pulls out his phone and reads off a list of books, both finished and on the TBR pile: *Fake Accounts,* the new novel by Lauren Oyler, which gets into Internet secrecy and online personas; *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity,* an economist's 1976 treatise on the potential for idiots to hold power; *The Body Keeps Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma,* the best seller; Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby.* "You know what's great? Rereading books," he says, his voice buoyant. "It's one of the most fun things

fought) for mainstream America, aka WHITE PEOPLE, to allow BLACKS *on their stages.*

you do, because you're reading the book as a different person."

And music. Red Hot Chili Peppers frontman Anthony Kiedis, another of Rock's aces, says, "Chris is one of the single biggest fans of music in general that I've ever met. A lot of people are deep into their jams earlier in life, and then they kind of lose touch with that wonder and that fascination with songs and music. . . . That whole infinitely healing energy of music of all varieties—Chris still has that."

Rock's polymath tendencies extend even to horror flicks. It was he who pitched Lionsgate top brass on doing a *Saw* with a few jokes, and he's not just a fan but a student of horror. "A lot of times you meet with people and they say, 'Oh, I love the horror genre,' and you can tell if they're bullshitting," says *Spiral* director Darren Lynn Bousman. "That was not him at all. He was giving very obscure references to movies, as well as very detail-oriented thoughts on the previous *Saw* films."

Rock plays a righteous detective in a corrupt department. It's a *Saw* film, so there's the requisite violence and gore, but it's also a cultural critique, with canny timing. "Coming in this time, I think the idea was about institutions and corrupt institutions, and the police not being the only corrupt institution," says Bousman. "That institution could be pharma, it could be churches, it could be police. But instead of going after individuals, we were going after institutions."

So yes, there is the cultural import of the project. And there is Rock's goal of pushing oneself as an artist. But Rock will still bust guts. "There's a scene where Chris has this dramatic encounter in the police station right after he finds out his partner died, and no one's taking it seriously, and he wants the case," says Bousman. "He comes in and he's screaming and going off and gets really emotional. We do it in one extremely long take—it's silent at the very end, and he's got tears coming down his cheek. And everyone on the set claps and they're like, 'Oh my God.' And he looks directly at the camera and goes, 'Lest no one forget: I was in *Pootie Tang*. So what I'm saying is, I have range.' "

"They keep trying to scare us. Telling us to be on the lookout for Al Qaeda. I ain't scared of Al Qaeda. I'm from Brooklyn. . . . Did Al Qaeda blow up the building in Oklahoma? No. Did Al Qaeda put anthrax in your mail? No. Did Al Qaeda drag James Byrd down the street till his eyeballs popped out his fuckin' head? No. I ain't scared of Al Qaeda. I'm scared of Al Cracker." —Never Scared, 2004

WHAT A DAY FOR A WALK IT IS: SPRING BALM, A BLUE SKY STRUNG with soft white clouds, the city sounding more song than cacophony. We stroll down Prince Street, emboldened with the vax-gifted aplomb that this walk won't be the death of us.

On West Broadway, a strange sight gives us pause: a phalanx of some thirty uniformed NYPD officers gathered on the north *and* south sides of the intersection.

The light changes for us to walk, but Rock waits, sussing out the scene.

"Something's going down," Rock says.

A white woman and a young white dude bop by with what seems no doubt whatsoever about being protected and served.

He just watches. Then:

"Oh! What's his name? The verdict's today. Did the verdict come in? Yeah, the verdict's today, and you got all the designer stores over here."

Ex-officer Derek Chauvin. Minneapolis. The jury is coming back in soon.

"Maybe they're about to start boarding them up," I say.

"Yeah. That's what's up," he says. "That's what's going down."

He pulls out his iPhone to check for alerts. And just that fast, our walk is more significant. Just that quick, I can imagine telling the story years later, where I was and who I was with when the Chauvin verdict came in. Then, *kaboom*, a hearttick later, it also hits me that the tension of this moment puts Rock and me at greater risk than our average risk, which even for us middle-aged Black men—wearing masks—is pretty darn dangerous.

(The moment reminds me of his opening monologue at the 2020 Oscars. "Mahershala Ali is here tonight. Mahershala has *two* Oscars," says Rock, looking so fresh and so clean in his tux. "You know what that means when the cops pull him over—nothing!")

We could walk another block—a detour I almost suggest—but don't. Instead, we huff across the crosswalk, and as we pass, I hear them blathering, the cops, see a few of their faces looking a bit too smug for the circumstances.

When we chat the next week about the encounter, I mention to Rock that I was wary that if something broke out . . .

He says, "Well, you know, in moments of chaos, we'll always be just two Black guys walking down the street."

"Pussy cost money. Dick is free." —Kill the Messenger, 2008

PICTURE A YOUNG, AFROED CHRIS ROCK—CHRISSY TO HIS SIBLINGS— helping his father load bundles of the New York *Daily News* onto his delivery truck at the paper's Brooklyn plant, a colossal eight-story building flanked by two low wings in Prospect Heights. Mid-seventies. Picture the pair working without words, grown satisfied with grunts of effort as a language. Picture Rock as a frail teen a few years later, him bolting out of the family's brownstone in the small blue-black hours to fetch a bundle his father has left him to sell. Picture him jaunting to a nearby subway stop and hawking his inky treasure till the whole stack sells.

"That was a great hustle," Rock says. "It was me, my siblings, sometimes my friend. But a lot of times it was just me, man, because who the fuck wants to get up at 4:30 in the summer?"

His father was living some version of the American dream. Rock's *Fargo* character depicts what that dream looked like seventy years ago and the ways in which Black people have tried to reap its rewards from land that proved barren for us but fecund as fuck for others. With Rock as its star, the show also serves as a critique of America's particular brand of racism. Says Noah Hawley, *Fargo*'s white creator and showrunner, "There is that violence to the Black experience in America. You're told to succeed, but you're not given the tools with which to succeed—and then you're judged for not succeeding. That becomes an impossible setup on some level. It makes it absurd, but it's not funny. The irony of it, without humor, is just violence."

Like untold essential aspects of Black culture, Black comedy was born in the antebellum South—how else to survive the malevolence that was chattel slavery? In their off-hours, enslaved Black people would gather on the plantation to entertain themselves. Before long, white people were avid spectators of the gatherings, the irony being that those enslaved Black folks were often mocking their white "masters," the paradox being that those performances helped birth the stereotype of the coon, and concomitant, the era of minstrelsy: white men, the most famous being Thomas "Jim Crow" Rice, smearing their faces with burned cork and deriding Black people in caricatures. It took almost one hundred years after the Civil War (in which Rock's great-great-grandfather fought) for mainstream America, aka white people, to allow Blacks on their stages.

Would there be a Chris Rock without the ribald Redd Foxx, who in the 1950s became one of the first Black men to cut a comedy album? Would there be a Chris Rock without the radical Dick Gregory, who in 1961 became the first Black comedian to perform in the Playboy Club? Would there be a Chris Rock without Bill Cosby breaking down Jim Crow barriers when Rock was still a boy? Would we have a Chris Rock without Richard Pryor (who Rock calls the GOAT) daring to transform what a comedian could say and do? Would we have known Chris Rock for as long as we have without Eddie Murphy owning *SNL* and the eighties?

And where does he sit in all this?

Check the record, Rock ranks high on the lists of all-time great comedians—Comedy Central (no. 5), *Rolling Stone* (no. 5), *Paste* (no. 2). He matters. Still, don't go offering him any lifetime-achievement awards. "I get these offers and I always turn them down," he says. "I'm always like, you can't be in the Hall of Fame and play at the same time." And for whosoever has the idea, it's best not to ask where he judges himself among his forebearers and peers.

Jacket by **Paul Smith;**
shirt and trousers by **Dior Men;**
sneakers by **Canali.**

A homeless-looking brother *stops cold* and *cocks* his head. "HEY, anybody ever tell you you look like CHRIS ROCK?" *he* says, then tilts his head the other direction, *and squints.* "*Wait a* minute!"

"What's my spot?" he says. "I'm just working. One day, we're going to look and it's going to be like, *Oh, I did a lot of work*. That's it. I did a lot of work. I'm just working, man."

"You would think the cops would occasionally shoot a white kid, just to make it look good. You would think that every couple of months, they'd look at their dead-nigga calendar and go, 'Oh my God, we're up to sixteen. We got to shoot a white kid quick.'" –Tamborine, 2018

JUST A FEW BLOCKS FROM THE RESTAURANT, ROCK POINTS TO the top floor of a building in SoHo and informs me that it's his new condo. Go figure, it's the first time he's ever lived in Manhattan. Which is interesting in itself–why he's living in New York.

"I'm looking for that thing where, Stevie Wonder is already Stevie Wonder, but then he moves to New York, and now it's *Innervisions,*" he says. "He's a whole new guy. He's already a superstar. He's already done *My Cherie Amour* and *Signed, Sealed, Delivered*. And Michael Jackson, same thing. Michael Jackson is fucking Michael Jackson. But then he moves to New York, and now he's doing *The Wiz,* and he's hanging out with Quincy [Jones], and now you got *Off the Wall* and *Thriller*. That shit's all here. He's living a lifestyle that can only happen in New York, and he made his best art."

The answer to that question about why's he still trying to prove himself even though his place in history is cement. Well, how about he ain't trying to prove himself at all. How about he's working, creating, ad infinitum, not because he wants to, really, but because he can't not do it, because deep down he suspects we need it. "Chris Rock is more comedian than public intellectual, but the intellectual is definitely there behind his performance," says Steve Martin, one of Rock's heroes. "He is working it hard–and he has courage. He has courage to go public with those thoughts that, *Oh, you're not supposed to say that*."

We huff down the street, see people milling in and out of stores with bags in hand–let the revenge shopping begin–see delivery drivers with the backs of their trucks swung open, see a clique of drippy youngsters bopping by, something funny turning their laughter bright as the day. About three quarters of the folks on the street wear masks, including Rock and me, who assured each other before we stepped out of the restaurant that we'd both been vaccinated.

A homeless-looking brother, old enough to be Rock's uncle, stops cold and cocks his head as though trying to x-ray Rock's mask. "Hey, anybody ever tell you you look like Chris Rock?" he says, tilts his head the other direction, and squints. "Wait a minute, wait a minute," he says, wagging a gnarled finger at Rock. "Are you Chris Rock?"

Rock pauses as if to consider an answer, but instead he rolls on without one. "I haven't figured out the joke yet," he says when I catch his stride. "It might even be in the next special. I don't know. But I wrote on a piece of paper the other day: *When the homeless know your name*. It's like, okay, talk about a fucking responsibility to the fucking world."

The early-afternoon hectic of cars zooming and weaving and breaking and honking up Avenue of the Americas. Rock checks his watch and tells me he needs to cut out for his therapy appointment. He waves down a yellow cab so quick it seems impossible. We bump elbows before he climbs inside and disappears into the crush.

Jacket, shirt, and trousers by **Salvatore Ferragamo.**

daddy ball

It started the way most dad-on-dad youth-sports rivalries do. But on the Long Island Inferno, two fathers, both with complicated pasts, took it all too far. There were claims of stalking, corrupt cops, and mob connections. Neither man was ever the same.

BY DAVID GAUVEY HERBERT

PHOTOGRAPH BY BELA BORSODI

DADS BRING THEIR SONS TO BASEBALL HEAVEN SO THEY CAN FEEL like pros. The facility, situated on an industrial lot off the Long Island Expressway, has recessed dugouts, proper bullpens, and stadium lights. On weekends, the lot fills with so many cars that minivans must illegally park on the roadway verge. Cleats *click-clack* on pavement, and cooler wheels groan. Fathers jockey for position to record their sons' swings and fixate on pitch velocity, murmuring the incantation "What's he at? What's he at?" Between games, boys wander the park with Gatorade-stained lips and gnash on Big League Chew. Inside the café, televisions simulcast play on all seven fields. The turf is artificial, which means the grass at Baseball Heaven is always green.

Every father finds his own way to this Eden, and for Bobby Sanfilippo, it all started at a batting cage on an autumn day in 2008. Sanfilippo and his seven-year-old son were taking practice swings when a skinny man in a windbreaker marveled at the boy's bat speed. He handed Sanfilippo a business card. How would his son like to try out for a travel baseball team called the Inferno? It would be expensive at $1,200 a season and require an aggressive schedule of forty-odd games a year, some of them at Baseball Heaven. It was a far cry from the dozen or so Little League games they were playing at the time. But Sanfilippo's son—who loved baseball so much his bedroom had a custom Yankee Stadium fresco—was thrilled at the prospect.

Sanfilippo was trying to figure out how to be a good dad and make his son feel special, and he figured travel baseball could play a big part in that. He had grown up in Brooklyn, in a cold house with a cold father, the owner of several bars in East New York. His dad was a rough guy, and he took little interest in Sanfilippo, who had to "grow up quick." His father got a brain tumor when Sanfilippo was fifteen, and they didn't patch things up before he died four years later. Sanfilippo was determined not to repeat the same mistakes with his little boy.

Sons grow up, and one day dads must leave Baseball Heaven, too. But Sanfilippo hasn't moved on. During his years at Baseball Heaven, he found himself enmeshed in an epic dad-on-dad rivalry with a man named John Reardon that led tabloids to call him "a Suffolk County Steinbrenner," "seriously sick," and one of the worst dads in youth-sports history. Nine years later, he still keeps a file of dirt he dug up on Reardon, his alleged victim. In fact, Sanfilippo has been waiting for someone to call him up and ask for his side of the story.

Reardon hasn't forgotten, either. "I don't need closure," he said, assuring me that his family "laughs about it sometimes." And yet he still finds himself Googling Sanfilippo and his son late at night. Reardon still considers Sanfilippo a "jackass" and "pathetic." His son is a "garbage kid." He still remembers the last time he saw Sanfilippo, in a parking lot outside a baseball field.

"Can't you just live your life?" Sanfilippo asked.

Reardon scowled. "Not until you're dead."

"IF HE BUILDS IT THEY WILL COME," READ THE *LONG ISLAND BUSINESS* *News* when Andy Borgia, owner of an office-supply company, sought financing for a new $8 million baseball complex. Baseball in Suffolk County had long meant stealing laundry soap to draw makeshift fields and twenty-inning neighborhood scrimmages. But by the late 1990s, parents craved more competition and facilities that would make their kids feel—and play—like pros. And when Baseball Heaven opened in April 2004, come they did.

"It had this aura, like its name," said Vinny Messana, who was in seventh grade when Baseball Heaven opened. "If you succeeded on that field, you'd made it."

At first, being involved with the Inferno at Baseball Heaven was magical for Sanfilippo. Every time he drove into the parking lot, his heart beat a little faster. The crack of bats, crowds cheering. He would have spent every summer day there if he could. His son was so enthusiastic that he developed a trademark headfirst slide into first base. The Inferno steamrollered the competition, and Sanfilippo lugged home trophies as tall as his son. (A condition for Sanfilippo's participation in this article was that his wife and son go unnamed to spare them further embarrassment.)

But the Inferno coach was a screamer who often reduced his seven-year-old players to tears. Parents constantly complained about "daddy ball," the phenomenon in which a coach's son always seemed to find himself playing the coveted shortstop position and batting first in the lineup. When a new coach, Rick DiRocco, took over the Inferno, he tried to keep things fun, but he was often forced to play peacemaker. Once, when a screaming match erupted between rival parents, he asked the opposing coach for help. "Don't tell me what to do," the man replied. "I'm a cop. I'll shoot you."

Baseball Heaven was partly responsible for the intensity, but what also gave Long Island baseball its unique flavor was the place itself. Nassau and Suffolk counties are home to 2.8 million people, most of them white and relatively prosperous. It has its own dialect—natives pronounce their home "Lawn Guyland"—and a reputation for dubious local figures.

A few baseball dads had sketchy backgrounds, too. One father, a manager at a Morton's steakhouse, was part of a massive credit-card-skimming ring for which he would later be indicted. Another was fighting criminal charges for mortgage fraud and had a fearsome reputation: He was rumored to have driven his car into the home of someone who owed him money. (I couldn't reach him to confirm or deny this.) A YouTube video later surfaced that reportedly showed him sucker punching an office worker.

Sanfilippo had his own rap sheet. In the mid-1990s, he was involved in a scheme luring foreign buyers to make "sizable deposits for the delivery of large quantities of cigarettes" that were then never delivered, according to court records. ("Everybody's got an uncle who knows somebody," he told me, by way of explanation.) In 2007 and 2008, he and his wife paid filmmaker George Stamou more than $300,000 to make *Easy Street,* a movie about his life as "a self-proclaimed former member of an organized-crime family," according to a subsequent civil suit.

THE INFERNO PLAYED WELL, BUT AS COMPETITION INCREASED, parents hungered to win more. If Coach DiRocco kept a weak player in a tight game and they lost, parents went ballistic. They even took the unusual step of scouting players themselves and recruited Jack Reardon, a young phenom. He came with some baggage, however: his father, John.

John Reardon was built like a fullback. His cheeks flushed when he got

IMAGES COURTESY OF BOBBY SANFILIPPO

angry, which was often. Reardon volunteered to keep the Inferno score book, but he was frequently at the dugout fence, screaming at players who made errors, especially Jack. His son played better when he wasn't around.

A few years before Jack joined the Inferno, the Department of Justice had charged Reardon for his involvement in a late-1990s Ponzi scheme in southern California that duped investors out of $45 million. Reardon eventually pleaded guilty to tax evasion. He avoided prison, but the conviction trailed him.

Both Sanfilippo and Reardon were cocksure, with dubious pasts. But Sanfilippo had charm and finesse, and he was thriving financially. He owned a five-bedroom mansion with an in-ground pool, a putting green, and a basketball court in a tony suburb. Reardon struggled in sales jobs and lived in a modest home. His life after the Ponzi scheme was a long glide into debt. He hadn't been able to bend the world the same way.

IN THE SUMMER OF 2010, THE INFERNO COACHES SENT AN EMAIL to parents with some devastating news: The team had too many players. If anyone was on the fence about the upcoming season, could they please quit now and obviate the need to make cuts? Sanfilippo had been surprised by the intensity of baseball parents, but Jack Reardon had upstaged his son on the field, and now he found himself getting emotional at even the prospect of his son getting the boot and Jack staying. Sanfilippo hit "reply all" and let rip. He promised to buy the team presents and trashed some families by name. The email shocked other parents, and DiRocco felt he had no choice but to ask Sanfilippo and his son to leave.

(Sanfilippo disputed that account, saying that his son asked to quit because of John Reardon's temper. Multiple Inferno parents, however, remembered the nasty email.)

Leaving the Inferno could have been a blessing for the Sanfilippos. Long Island travel baseball was getting more intense. Dads bought their sons weighted balls to build arm strength, but that could also lead to injuries. Long Island kids began appearing in the waiting room at the Hospital for Special Surgery in Manhattan, sheepish dads in tow. "Their opening salvo is 'I didn't let them pitch too much,' " said David Altchek, an orthopedic surgeon specializing in Tommy John surgery, a procedure typically reserved for pros.

After a loss, dads might congregate in the parking lot to grumble. If losses piled up, they took their sons and bolted to a new squad. And if his kid sat too many innings or a coach's mediocre son batted too high in the order, a dad was liable to get pissed. When a father's anger about "daddy ball" didn't erupt in the stands, or at a hotel bar on a tournament trip, it found its way to an online message board, Called Strike Three, the emotional sewer for Long Island baseball families. The board was Internet 1.0, with cheesy graphics and an unwieldy interface. A moderator edited personal attacks, so parents gave one another nicknames like "Fidel," "Fester," and "McSlimeball." Virtually everyone posted anonymously.

"I feel bad for your kid who has to wake up every morning knowing that his father is a big [expletive]."

"I doubt that, but your [*sic*] a delusional idiot so keep talking . . . I like the banter, its [*sic*] like a bad episode of Springer."

"Before you call anybody an idiot, please proof read your response, your grammar is as good as your grip on reality."

Sanfilippo and his son joined the Elwood Thunder, a low-key, no-drama team. It was fun, but after the Inferno, Sanfilippo had caught the travel-ball bug. He wanted to put together a powerhouse squad for his son, so he started his own team. He placed flyers on windshields at batting cages and took out an ad in *Newsday* to recruit top players. He helped create a team logo: a skull against crossed baseball bats. The team would be called the Long Island Vengeance.

While other teams were now charging upwards of $2,500 a season, Sanfilippo self-financed the Vengeance. Players got free bat bags, helmets airbrushed with skulls, and blood-red jerseys. The source of the money was unclear. Sanfilippo told me that "New Jersey friends" who liked his son bankrolled the team and that the cost wasn't near the $50,000 that tabloids later reported. Many dads were happy to play free travel ball. "I was going through a bad divorce at that time, so it was a home run for me, no pun intended," said Brian McCready, the father of an outfielder, who also helped coach.

Reardon was having money problems, too, and when he heard about a new, fully funded travel team, he inquired. But when he learned it was Sanfilippo's squad, Reardon told me he changed his mind. (Sanfilippo said that when he got an email from Reardon, it was he who told Reardon that his family was not welcome. Whatever the case, one of them was badly snubbed.)

Early that spring, the Inferno and the Vengeance squared off, and Sanfilippo's new team got stomped. Reardon shouted from the dugout at Sanfilippo's ten-year-old son: "Learn how to play your fucking position!"

IT WAS MEMORIAL DAY WEEKEND 2012. SANFILIPPO HAD RECENTLY recruited a handful of players from another team, and the Vengeance and the Inferno had a rematch. The game was nauseatingly close. Reardon sat on a bucket and chirped all game—so aggressively that the umpire twice cautioned him. The Inferno clung to a one-run lead. Jack Reardon was on the mound to close out the game. Sanfilippo's son stepped into the batter's box with two outs. He worked a full count, and then Jack fired one low and away. Called strike three. The Inferno had won again.

"Sit the fuck down, Sanfilippo!" Reardon screamed from the dugout at the ten-year-old who had just struck out.

Roger Kalinowski, third-base coach for the Vengeance, swiveled around. "What are you, out of your fuckin' mind?" he cried.

They kept arguing, and then Reardon emerged from the dugout carrying a baseball bat. (Reardon told me he did indeed get a bat but that it was a joke.) McCready saw the bat and lost it, and soon coaches were streaming onto the field. Several months later, a YouTube user named "anonymouslongisland" uploaded a cell phone video of what happened next.

"What are you crying about?" Sanfilippo shouted at Reardon. "You won!"

McCready added, "Don't mouth off. Just walk away, bro."

At that, Reardon charged. "What are you gonna do?" he screamed. "What are you gonna do?"

Inferno coaches held back Reardon, finally muscling him off the field as he shouted, "Suck my dick!"

OPPOSITE: The Long Island Vengeance in their home and travel uniforms.

FAR RIGHT: Vengeance dads Bobby Sanfilippo and Brian McCready.

"My son was crying," Sanfilippo told me. "His son was crying. Half the dugout was crying. It was horrible. It was fuckin' horrible." Reardon, he decided, was "the kind of guy who will punch you peeing in the stall."

Of the video, Reardon told me: "I don't even think that was me, to be honest. And even if it was, it was probably just the portion where I was joking." But Reardon looks deadly serious in the video, which now has 1.2 million views.

On the Inferno side, Coach DiRocco had seen enough of Reardon and banned him from the dugout. DiRocco also decided that drinking in the stands was fueling bad behavior. He asked parents to lay off the red Solo cups at games.

"Is that just for a little while," a mother asked hopefully, "or is that forever?"

SANFILIPPO TOLD ME HE DIDN'T GIVE REARDON ANOTHER THOUGHT that summer. He had a lot to do. Sanfilippo paid for tournament registrations, flights, uniforms, and food on the road. He took the boys to Yankees games, where they sat behind the home dugout. The Vengeance played more than eighty games that season.

The Vengeance were becoming the Sanfilippo show—literally. In August 2012, he met TV producer Jon Schroder at a diner in Manhattan. Sanfilippo was TV gold. ("I wish I would've filmed the breakfast," Schroder told me.) They agreed to shoot a sizzle reel for a reality show.

When Schroder visited Sanfilippo's mansion in Huntington for a massive backyard pool party, he thought he'd stepped into an alternate universe. Mark Giacometti, a Vengeance dad, was a chef at a gourmet grocery store, and he brought mountains of baked ziti, chicken francese, heroes, and steak with brown sauce. Long-nailed mothers and tattooed fathers cursed and gossiped and ate. Sanfilippo paid a barber to shave a skull into the back of his son's head.

The team's schedule was grueling. "We were constantly playing fuckin' baseball," McCready told me. "It was fuckin' brutal, bro." Before a tournament, Sanfilippo would sit at his kitchen table debating the lineup with his wife, knowing that one wrong move on his magnet board could make a dad go crazy. Vengeance parents logged on to Called Strike Three to anonymously gripe. But as long as Sanfilippo was cutting checks and grilling rib eye steaks, they didn't openly revolt.

For Sanfilippo, his son was playing well and having fun. To the TV crews, he was open about what motivated him. "When I hear people talkin' their dad this, their dad that . . . I wish I could say that," Sanfilippo told the camera. "But I know my son's gonna be able to say that."

John Reardon? Furthest thing from his mind.

ONE JUNE MORNING, IT WAS JOHN REARDON'S TURN TO DRIVE THE car pool to school when he noticed a blue Mini Cooper on his street. It was unusual—people rarely parked there. As he pulled away, the Mini Cooper did a quick U-turn and followed him and the four kids in his car all the way to Burr Intermediate. Reardon walked Jack and the others into school and then headed off. The blue car stayed in his rearview.

Reardon made a right turn, then another right, figuring he was just paranoid. But the driver, a bald guy, continued to follow. On a dead-end street, Reardon made a U-turn, hoping to box in the Mini Cooper, but the tiny car slipped away.

Two months later, on August 23, 2012, Reardon was at a business dinner when his phone buzzed with a text. He peeked down.

"See you at Baseball Heaven, scumbag."

Three minutes later, his phone beeped again. This time he was staring at a picture of his own home and a message: "I'm your bad dream motherfucker."

Then, thirty minutes later, a blurry photo, taken with a long-distance zoom lens, of Reardon's wife. The texts went on through the afternoon, including two more photos of his home. "Figured you for a nicer house, did you spend all of that money you stole on lawyers, you fat jerkoff?"

Reardon wondered if the texts were from an aggrieved Ponzi-scheme investor, someone still pissed about money lost a decade earlier. Or maybe it was a prank. Reardon didn't tell his wife. He didn't want to worry her.

But the messages continued into the following day, with more fuzzy, long-distance photos of his wife. "You will never see it coming Reardon," read one.

Reardon's phone soon buzzed with a new photo: a crystal-clear image of little Jack Reardon waiting for the school bus with the message "Maybe I'll pick him up at the bus stop for you next week. . . . When I get done with you you'll move, sleep tight, asshole. You have no idea who you are dealing with, tell Jack not to talk to strangers. You're an asshole, another guy you fucked over."

The next day, Reardon was at Baseball Heaven for a tournament. Between games, Jack vanished. Reardon checked the field, the dugout, and the concession stand. He started to panic. Then he saw Jack coming out of the bathroom. Reardon rushed over. Jack looked up and asked, "What's wrong, Dad?"

THE REALITY-TV CREW SET UP AT BASEBALL HEAVEN IN THE AFTERNOON of September 21, 2012. The Vengeance parents were excited—if the show got green-lit, they all stood to make good money. It was the first inning, and Sanfilippo was coaching third base when a Vengeance dad whispered to him through the fence that Suffolk County detectives were looking for him.

Sanfilippo saw officers blocking the exits. When the inning ended, he walked up to the lead detective, whose name Sanfilippo recalls as "McCloud or some fucking shit." What follows is Sanfilippo's account of what happened next. (A Suffolk County Police Department spokesperson declined to comment, as the case records are currently sealed.)

"Take your fuckin' mic off, Sanfilippo," the detective said. Three plainclothes police officers stood around him. They asked if he knew John Reardon.

"Yeah, I know Reardon," Sanfilippo said. "He's an asshole."

"Oh, so you don't like him?" the detective asked. He asked for Sanfilippo's phone.

"My phone's in my coaching bag, which is in the dugout," Sanfilippo said. "Be my guest and go get it."

"Not that fuckin' phone. The throwaway phone. The burner."

Sanfilippo shut up. His wife called their lawyer. A cop spun Sanfilippo around and started handcuffing him while another officer laughed.

"Don't do this here," a third officer pleaded, hoping to shield two dozen kids from the arrest.

"No," the lead detective said. "He's gonna do the walk."

If parents or players said anything, Sanfilippo didn't register it. All he heard was ringing in his ears. Officers marched him beyond the cameras and out of Baseball Heaven. Police shoved him into the back of a squad car, with his hands cuffed in reverse so they'd fall asleep. Sanfilippo was scared. He claimed the officer punched him in the ribs, which is when he knew he "was fucked."

At the station, an officer latched his cuffs to a wall hook. Sanfilippo asked to use the bathroom. The officer gave him another punch in the back and kicked away the chair so he couldn't sit. Sanfilippo threatened to defecate on the floor until he was allowed to use the toilet.

Sanfilippo soon overheard a phone call. "Don't worry, Johnny," he heard the officer say. (Of the roughly 3.2 million men named John in America, Sanfilippo was sure the cop was talking to John Reardon.) "We got his fuckin' photo goin' to everybody. The only one left I gotta fax it to is *Newsday*."

That night, officers cranked up the air conditioning and handed out blankets to other inmates. Sanfilippo shivered on a concrete bench. If he'd had his phone, he could have read *Newsday*'s breaking story, published just after midnight: YOUTH BASEBALL COACH STALKED RIVAL.

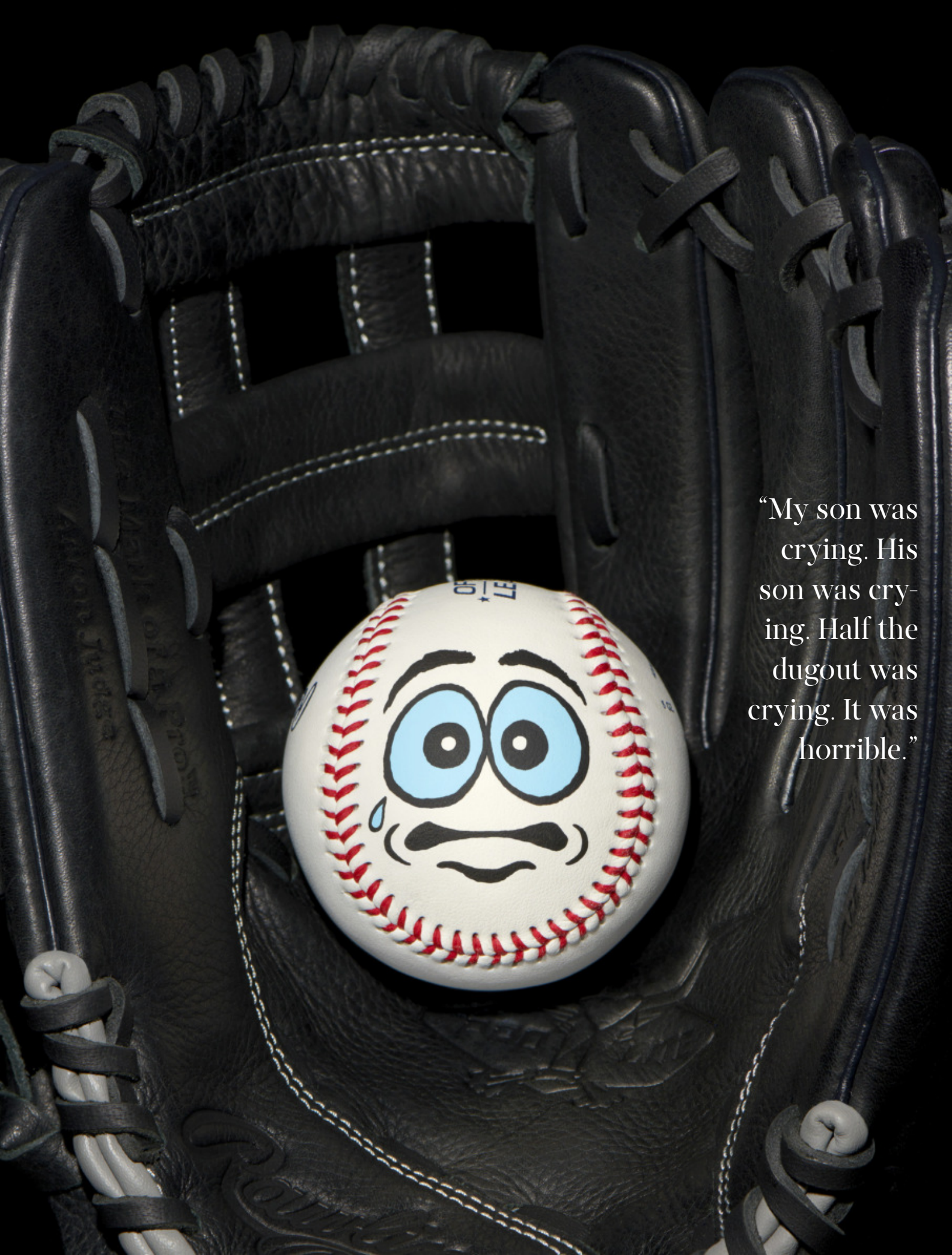
In the morning, TV cameramen gathered outside the Fourth Precinct, where they had a clear view of Sanfilippo as officers marched him out in handcuffs. He was still wearing his black Vengeance shirt. "Disgruntled parents that don't make travel teams do crazy things," Sanfilippo said to a camera crew, a reference to his refusal to let Jack Reardon join the Vengeance. "That's travel baseball for ya."

"So you're innocent?"

"Absolutely. Absolutely."

A judge released Sanfilippo, and a producer drove him home. Sanfilippo's

PHOTOGRAPH BY BELA BORSODI



"My son was crying. His son was crying. Half the dugout was crying. It was horrible."

wife was a mess. After the arrest, she had downed two Xanax. Parents gathered to "help," including the dad in the midst of a credit-card-skimming case. He was so paranoid that he burned Sanfilippo's cell phone charger on the barbecue, suspecting it contained a police bug.

The Vengeance had previously scheduled a pool party for that afternoon, and Sanfilippo insisted on going ahead with it. Parents arrived with food and a cake decorated with the team's skull logo. The TV crew trailed Sanfilippo around the party. Away from the kids, he unloaded.

"I tell you what, this fuckin' John Reardon is the reason why I spent the past twenty fuckin' hours in jail, because of that cocksucker," Sanfilippo said, gesturing wildly. "And if he was here right now, I would fuckin' beat him down to the ground."

The Vengeance parents weren't sure what to make of it. Some thought the whole thing was a practical joke. Schroder, the producer, suspected Sanfilippo had staged the arrest to create drama for the sizzle reel.

As details emerged, though, the gravity of the situation sank in. Detectives had tracked the sale of a phone card to a CVS pharmacy a few towns away. Reardon had come down to the Fourth Precinct to look at security footage. He couldn't quite make out the face, so he asked Coach DiRocco to come, too. They fingered Sanfilippo in his Vengeance gear, leaving the store with a phone card and a case of water.

Reardon feasted on the media attention. Suffolk County police had indeed called to say they were tipping off journalists, he told me. (They also relayed that Sanfilippo cried all the way to the precinct.) Reardon obtained an order of protection against Sanfilippo. The more Reardon talked to reporters, the more the story went viral—a sports dad turned stalker over a strikeout. "It all started with a swing and a diss," the *New York Post* wrote. On *Good Morning America,* George Stephanopoulos chuckled at the end of a two-minute segment and asked, incredulously, "Long Island Vengeance?"

"Don't do this here," an officer pleaded, hoping to shield two dozen kids from the arrest of Bobby Sanfilippo (near left).

FAR LEFT: John Reardon.

SANFILIPPO HAD BECOME A CELEBRITY, AND IN ALL THE WRONG WAYS. After his arrest, at a game on Staten Island, a dad heckled the team from the stands. When the Vengeance pulled ahead, he started in on Sanfilippo: "What are you gonna do?" he shouted. "You gonna come take pictures of my kid?"

Called Strike Three lit up with comments from parents reveling in schadenfreude at a rich dad finally cut down.

"I heard a new shipment of furs fell off the back of the truck. I guess Sanfilippo can go shopping for a new player!"

"All the wins in the world can't hide the fact that you allow your kid to be around, coached, bought, and sold by a crazy, stalking, lunatic criminal."

Sanfilippo said he began to worry about his safety. He spotted unmarked cars tailing him as he left his home. His wife was at the nail salon when she noticed the detective who had arrested her husband watching her through the window.

"I think we gotta move," Sanfilippo told his wife. "They're gonna make me disappear. I know it."

In the meantime, Sanfilippo paid $500 to have off-duty law enforcement shadow him at games; he wanted witnesses in case Reardon falsely claimed he'd violated the order of protection.

The producers pressed ahead with the sizzle reel. "I know I could depend on every single person on this team," Sanfilippo's wife told the camera.

BUT SHE WAS WRONG. "IT WAS FIFTY-FIFTY PEOPLE BELIEVING THE stalking charge," said Giacometti, the chef and father of a Vengeance player. He wasn't sure what to think, but he'd had enough. In May 2013, Giacometti and a few others pulled their kids off the team. Sanfilippo was furious. They had eaten at his home, swum in his pool, and worked out on his dime. Now they were splitting. A few months later, Sanfilippo saw Giacometti near the snack bar at Baseball Heaven and went out of his way to brush past, looking for a fight.

"Sanfilippo, no handshake?" Giacometti asked.

"Mark," he said, "why don't you go fuck your mother?"

The case against Sanfilippo seemed weak, said his lawyer James O'Rourke. And Sanfilippo's hunch about the police hadn't gone away. He had friends in law enforcement, and he told me one of them had made a frightening connection: John Reardon was distantly related to James Burke, the police chief of Suffolk County. (Reardon denied this, saying that he "never met that guy. I never talked to him.") Around this time, *Newsday* began reporting on Burke and corruption in his department.

Sanfilippo weighed his options. He was tempted to go to trial—so tempted that he bought vanity license plates that read DISMSSED. But a good defense might cost $40,000. And even if he won, his reputation had already taken a beating, and his son had been humiliated. In February 2014, Sanfilippo pleaded guilty to a single count of disorderly conduct and paid a $120 fine. Outside afterward, a friend photographed him flipping off the courthouse.

But Sanfilippo's friend in law enforcement assured him something big was going down at the Suffolk County Police Department. "Shit's gonna hit the fan," he promised. "Sit back and watch. Get some popcorn."

IT WAS STILL DARK OUT ON THE MORNING OF DECEMBER 9, 2015, when unmarked cars pulled up to a home in the hamlet of St. James. Agents wore trademark FBI windbreakers. Burke, the police chief, chatted calmly with them as they placed him in handcuffs.

Sanfilippo's friend had been right. The Suffolk County Police Department wasn't just dirty—it was about to become one of the most notorious law-enforcement agencies in America. Burke had run the department like the KGB, federal prosecutors later said. Loyal officers, whom Burke dubbed his "palace guards," routinely surveilled and harassed rival cops and carried out personal vendettas. Thomas Spota, the county district attorney and Burke's close ally, meanwhile "operated in a manner more akin to criminal enterprise," federal prosecutors alleged.

In December 2012, just a few months after Sanfilippo was arrested, police had nabbed Christopher Loeb, a young heroin addict, for breaking into Burke's car. In an interrogation room, Burke and others beat Loeb and threatened to give him a "hot shot," a fatal injection of heroin, and make it look like an accidental overdose. A judge later set Loeb's bail at $500,000, an astronomical figure for such a petty crime.

Sanfilippo ticked off the similarities to his own arrest—same precinct, same jailhouse beating, same bogus judicial proceedings.

"Anything goes with Burke," said Pat Cuff, a former Suffolk County police commander who testified about his disgraced former boss at a related corruption trial. "There is no bottom. Nothing would surprise me."

Sanfilippo felt vindicated. But the stalking case still trailed him. The real-

IMAGES COURTESY OF BOBBY SANFILIPPO

ity show never got picked up. In 2016, Sanfilippo wrote a memoir, *Called Strike Three,* to exonerate himself—some iteration of the word *fuck* appears ninety-three times in 182 pages—but he never published it. He considered hiring ReputationDefender, a company that specializes in cleaning up online search results, but balked at the cost.

And all the while, Sanfilippo claimed, although his son was working hard and getting better at baseball, coaches, college scouts, and journalists who compiled power rankings looked askance at the boy.

In 2017, when Sanfilippo's son was in tenth grade, his school faced off against Jack Reardon's. Sanfilippo left the game early to avoid a scene. When he reached the parking lot, he heard heavy footsteps behind him. Like so much of their saga, both men remember it differently. But they agree that Sanfilippo brought up Reardon's tax-evasion conviction, and they nearly came to blows.

"Reardon, do me a favor," Sanfilippo said. "Either throw the first punch or get the fuck away from me."

"There's gonna be a day when I bump into you and nobody's gonna be around," Reardon said. "There's gonna be no cameras. No videotape. We'll see what happens."

SANFILIPPO REMINDED ME OF MY FRIEND'S DAD GROWING UP IN Brooklyn, who was unpredictable in every way except that he was always on our side. I didn't want to believe he'd sent those horrible messages. But the more I dug into the corruption claims, the less I could verify.

Cuff, the former police commander, was dubious about Sanfilippo's claims. "In all candor, I probably would've heard something about it," he told me. Two other high-ranking officers stationed at the Fourth Precinct in September 2012 were skeptical as well. Sanfilippo wouldn't connect me with the friend he claimed had found that supposed connection between Burke and Reardon.

Rob Trotta, a retired detective who is now a Suffolk County legislator and outspoken critic of his old department, told me that after the corruption investigation came to light, prison inmates began regularly sending him letters claiming, conveniently, that Burke had framed them, too.

And I was learning more, not about Sanfilippo's past but about his present. In 2019, an Alabama bankruptcy trustee sought to recover more than $3 million from Sanfilippo that he had received from Timothy McCallan, the alleged mastermind of a $107 million debt-counseling scam. The trustee alleged that Sanfilippo and his companies had helped McCallan hide stolen money. The case was dropped after Sanfilippo agreed to provide information to the trustee.

O'Rourke, the defense attorney, had recently destroyed his files for Sanfilippo's stalking case. And Suffolk County had sealed the criminal files. Only Sanfilippo himself could access them, and I asked him repeatedly to do so. "It's not happenin'," he told me. "It's stayin' sealed, pal."

I met with Sanfilippo this past February. He lives down south now. (Another condition for this article was that I not reveal exactly where.) He and his wife crossed the Verrazzano Bridge in September 2019 and never looked back. He's building a new home on a quiet lane in a gated community. There will be plenty of room for the dozens of trophies, game balls, and other mementos from his summers at Baseball Heaven.

I arrived early at an overpriced brunch spot near his home and staked out the restaurant, hoping to observe him before we met. But Sanfilippo immediately identified me as he and his wife drove up in a golf cart. "I thought that was you," he said, crushing my fingers in an iron handshake. "I looked you up on YouTube."

Sanfilippo swaggered into the diner like a guy who could handle himself in a fight, took the seat he wanted, and marveled at his good fortune. "It's a fuckin' fairy tale," he said in his Brooklyn accent, a little too loudly for the southerners at the next table. But he was circumspect with neighbors like these. He knew when someone had just Googled him. They went from friendly waves to giving his golf cart a wide berth.

We spoke for hours. Sanfilippo was still worried about Reardon, and he raged about the police, traitorous parents, and the toll the scandal had taken on his family. One dad who had bailed on the Vengeance, the credit-card skimmer, had recently reached out. "He said, 'Tell your wife I miss her meatballs,' " Sanfilippo said and smirked. "I got some meatballs for ya."

But his son was doing well. Sanfilippo was proud of the boy, who was now a young man playing college baseball and staying out of trouble. That afternoon, his son called every hour, as he always does when driving long distances.

Sanfilippo wanted to know if I had a kid. Other baseball dads I spoke to were the same. They usually asked right after revealing that they'd let their son play one hundred games of baseball in a single year, or the number of ninety-dollar half-hour hitting lessons they'd purchased, or why they'd stayed on a team after parents got in a fistfight at Applebee's. They wanted to find out if I was a fellow traveler, someone who could understand what had been, in hindsight, collective insanity.

"I chose to be the opposite of my dad," Sanfilippo said. His father's final years were spent in a hospital bed in their living room, and Sanfilippo pumped gas after school to help pay the bills.

"How much of your parenting is a response to that?" I asked.

"All of it," he said.

Sanfilippo excused himself to go to the bathroom. When he returned, he sniffled a few times, dabbed at his eyes, and then stared into the distance.

That night, I was sitting at a bar when my phone lit up with old videos of Sanfilippo's son smacking base hits. The next night, after another lunch together, he texted me photos of game balls and plastic prizes.

Sanfilippo still couldn't process the guilt: His notoriety had turned scouts off his son. "I deal with that every day, and it's fucked up," he said. But he couldn't bear to dissociate from the experience, either. Those summers were the best of his life. They still made his heart full. Memory can be a garden or a prison, and Sanfilippo was trapped in Baseball Heaven.

And then, when I returned to New York, John Reardon surfaced again. He agreed to have lunch.

LONG ISLAND TRAVEL BASEBALL TODAY MAKES 2012 LOOK QUAINT. Squads aren't just "teams"; they're "organizations," some of which charge upwards of $3,500 a season, plus thousands more for airfare and high-profile "showcase" tournaments with college scouts. Vinny Messana, who remembered Baseball Heaven opening when he was in seventh grade, today runs Axcess Baseball, a website devoted to covering Long Island teams. The site has banner ads for local orthopedic surgeons who perform Tommy John operations on pitchers as young as twelve.

Baseball Heaven is owned by Steel Partners, a holding company with $1.6 billion in annual revenue and additional interests in banking, defense, and energy. The facility has a new $1.9 million indoor space and, before Covid, hosted more than half a million fans per year. Parents pay thirteen dollars per month to stream games online—and take screenshots of bad calls by umpires, which they post to social media. Andy Borgia, the office-supply-company owner who founded Baseball Heaven, has plans to replicate the model in Connecticut.

I met John Reardon at Mannino's, an Italian restaurant a short drive from Baseball Heaven. Reardon had grown a goatee, but he still had that stocky build and red face that looked ready to pop. He had been keeping tabs—he knew the cost of tuition at the elite sports academy that Sanfilippo's son had attended ($85,000), where the kid played college ball, and even the town where the Sanfilippos had relocated. But over calamari, he denied framing his rival or even knowing Burke, the disgraced ex-police chief. "Imagine being able to go around having people arrested," he said. "That'd be nice."

Jack Reardon's baseball career had flourished. He had ranked sixth on a local Blue Chip prospect list and was playing at the University of New Haven. It was still early days, but one former coach of his said he might yet be good enough to play pro ball.

But while Sanfilippo had continued to find financial success, Reardon's life had gone in the opposite direction. A FOR SALE sign hung outside his home. "Good time to sell," he told me. In fact, the family was in financial trouble. His wife had recently filed for bankruptcy for a second time. On the petition, among their monthly expenses, she listed (continued on page 102)

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h e i g h t s

From Broadway TO *television* to ONE of *the* summer's buzziest movies, actor COREY HAWKINS is on *the* rise

W

e

By Justin Kirkland
Photographs by Djeneba Aduayom
Styling by Alison Edmond

PRECEDING PAGES, from left: Jacket ($3,745), T-shirt ($795), and trousers ($1,075) by **Dolce & Gabbana;** sunglasses ($490) by **Rhude.** Jacket ($2,645), shirt ($645), and trousers ($1,145) by **Dolce & Gabbana;** necklace ($300) and ring ($200) by **the M Jewelers. THIS PAGE,** from top: Shirt ($1,345) and trousers ($1,225) by **Dolce & Gabbana;** chain ($255), Pietersite tag pendant ($790), silver bracelet ($325), blue bracelet ($395), and Pietersite ring ($575) by **David Yurman;** feather necklace ($195) and hammered ring ($195) by **Degs & Sal.** Towel ($845; worn as scarf) and tank ($195) by **Dolce & Gabbana;** turquoise ring ($175) by **the M Jewelers. OPPOSITE:** Robe ($3,995), tank ($195), trousers ($1,345), and sneakers ($545) by **Dolce & Gabbana;** Pietersite ring ($575) by **David Yurman.**

IN 2017, ACTOR COREY HAWKINS WAS filming a movie in Toronto when he got a call from the producers of the U.S. Open. The singer they had booked to perform at the start of the men's singles final had fallen through—would Hawkins like to do it? "I was like, 'So, you all want me to do what?' " he recalls. "They were like, 'Sing "God Bless America" while the planes fly over.' I'm like, 'Okay.' " Within twenty-four hours, on September 10, Hawkins was at Arthur Ashe Stadium, in Queens, belting his heart out. He didn't know it at the time, but among the 23,000 people in the stands sat Lin-Manuel Miranda, and Hawkins's performance was an informal audition for the film adaptation of the playwright's breakout musical, *In the Heights*.

For Hawkins, thirty-two, landing the role of Benny, a taxi dispatcher who dreams of building his own business, was serendipitous. *In the Heights* was the first musical he saw, soon after he'd moved to New York City to study drama at Juilliard. It's set in Washington Heights, the predominantly Dominican neighborhood in upper Manhattan, just blocks from the apartment in Harlem he shared with six roommates when he was starting out as an actor.

The show is both a love letter to the people who live there and a sharp critique of the forces, most notably gentrification, that threaten their way of life.

Hawkins, who is Black, can relate to the story line. He grew up in Southeast Washington, D.C., and says so much has changed in the fifteen years since he left. It's as if someone dragged one of those big pink erasers across the capital west to east, carving a Caucasian path through a town once affectionately known as Chocolate City. He attended Duke Ellington School of the Arts, the elite magnet school that counts Dave Chappelle as an alum. Hawkins and his friends—"scrappy art kids," as he describes them, including *The Handmaid's Tale*'s Samira Wiley—would gather after school at Busboys and Poets, a restaurant and bookstore that served as a de facto community center. Today, Busboys and Poets is a nine-location franchise with Black-history factoids posted on the walls for customers to ponder while they peruse the vegan brunch options. "Where I grew up, they're beautiful townhouses now, with yards and grass, homes you can barely afford," he says. "I'm like, *Whoa, what is happening?*"

At Juilliard, Hawkins was one of the few Black students enrolled in the drama school. "Juilliard was tough because we . . ." he says, trailing off as he searches for the words. "They didn't see us." In class, he would practice the accents of the international students from Britain and Iceland, but "no one ever really had to do our accents," he says. "We had the burden of teaching our teachers," only one of whom was Black. The pressure to assimilate nearly overwhelmed Hawkins. "There's a part of you that has to code-switch to be a certain way around the white folk," he says. Worse, "you think that's acceptable."

After graduating in 2011, he began winning parts in television projects and off-Broadway productions. In 2013, he made his Broadway debut in *Romeo and Juliet,* and he scored the role of a young Dr. Dre in the 2015 film *Straight Outta Compton*. He still remembers the time a producer pulled him aside to discuss the movie's characters: "They were like, 'Just so you know, these people are from the street. I know you went to Juilliard.' " The producer meant it as advice, but in effect he was questioning the actor's chops, while also suggesting that no one could embody both worlds.

Hawkins's résumé is evidence to the contrary. After *In the Heights,* he will star alongside Denzel Washington and Frances McDormand in Joel Coen's *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. "Just a bunch of hacks," Hawkins says of his collaborators, laughing. "Imma wipe the floor with all these newbies." He swoons over working with McDormand—"Jesus Christ. What? This woman can do no wrong!"—and especially Washington, whom he considers a mentor. "I appreciate him taking me under his wing and literally having chats, being able to pick his brain and watch him work," he says.

Hawkins may have accomplished his childhood dream of making it as an actor, but, he says, "it's still not enough." He's producing now and selecting projects that highlight new voices. He is learning the importance of paying forward one's success, whether it's "seeing Denzel create the foundation so that I can step in there and exist in that same space"; "watching Lin plant the seeds for Anthony [Ramos]," Hawkins's *In the Heights* costar; or remembering the way Miranda spotted a relatively unknown performer at a tennis tournament and took note. "It's about creating space for each other," Hawkins says. "Hopefully it makes it easier for the next kid to come around."

FOR STORE INFORMATION SEE PAGE 102. PRODUCTION: RACHELLE PHILLIPS/CRAWFORD & CO. GROOMING: TASHA REIKO BROWN FOR CHANEL AT THE WALL GROUP.

the trial that changed hip-hop

In 1993, Tupac Shakur had the world in his hands—until he was charged with sexual abuse. The trial consumed headlines for nearly a year, but there's still so much we don't know. For the first time, a juror is speaking out about what happened inside the jury room, raising powerful questions about race, criminal justice, and the mistreatment of women that echo today. By Sheldon Pearce

After surviving being shot five times, Tupac arrives at a Manhattan court in a wheelchair, surrounded by seven bodyguards.

TUPAC SHAKUR WAS ONE OF THE WORLD'S TOP-SELLING HIP-HOP ARTISTS *and a burgeoning movie star in 1993 when he was charged with sexual abuse for an incident that occurred inside a New York hotel room. The case went on for nearly a year, during which time Shakur would survive a shooting, and resulted in his conviction at trial for first-degree sexual abuse. He would serve nine months of a four-and-a-half-year maximum sentence, which would mark the beginning of his tragic downfall. This excerpt adapted from a forthcoming oral history follows the artist's story through this turbulent chapter.*

JUSTIN TINSLEY (The Undefeated staff writer): Think about where Tupac was in the summer of 1993. He's becoming this household name. *Juice* was a cult classic. Pac was already known by the federal government, not just because of his last name but because former vice president Dan Quayle wanted [his debut album] *2Pacalypse Now* taken off the shelves. *Poetic Justice* is set to hit theaters later that year. Now he's in New York filming what will be his third major role, *Above the Rim,* and spending time with these movers and shakers.

CHARISSE JONES (former *New York Times* staff writer, *USA Today* correspondent, coauthor of *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America*): On the one hand, you're seeing him in *Above the Rim,* and he's got this amazing career that is taking off in a direction that was unprecedented. At that time, you didn't have a lot of rappers who were crossing those boundaries. It was such a surprising thing to see at that time. It was like, *God, I hope he can keep this going. I hope he doesn't shatter that.* I was also starting to worry a little bit that this guy's got the world in his hands, but he's juggling it. What's going to happen?

JUSTIN TINSLEY: If you were in New York in the nineties and you were in the know, you knew Haitian Jack. Jack knew all of the party promoters. Jack knew all of the DJs. Jack was fly. Jack was flashy. Jack had no problem putting holes in people. Tupac said that the role of Birdie in *Above the Rim* was inspired by Jack. It was great, until it wasn't. Pac picked up a lot of game from Jack, and Jack says he really enjoyed hanging out with Tupac. Pac became really embedded in that New York underworld, and once you open Pandora's box, you can't put shit back in there. Eventually, some real street shit is gonna happen, and lines will be drawn in the sand.

The night of the sexual-assault incident was November 18, 1993. Literally three weeks before that, Pac is in Atlanta and he shoots two off-duty police officers because he sees them accosting a Black driver. At that point in time, you would think that him shooting two off-duty police officers would be the biggest legal hurdle. But that November, he's introduced to Ayanna Jackson at Nell's [a Manhattan nightclub that closed in 2004]. Allegedly, they go to a corner of the club to perform oral sex. Then they go back to his hotel and they have consensual sex. I think that part is pretty much accepted. Everything after that is all about who you choose to believe. I truly believe—and I'm not exercising any hyperbole when I say this—this is the single most impactful, consequential case in rap history. Because the chain of events that happens after November 18 alters the course of rap.

Four days after the incident at Nell's, Ayanna Jackson returned to Tupac's hotel suite. The two were there with Tupac's manager, Charles "Man Man" Fuller; Haitian Jack; and a friend of Jack's who remained unidentified. Jackson claimed that she was forced to perform oral sex on Tupac while Jack undressed her and then she was forced to perform oral sex on Jack's friend while Tupac held her down. Tupac claimed that he left the room when the other men came in and didn't see what happened after. Jackson sought out hotel security, and Tupac, Jack, and Fuller were arrested. The unidentified man was never located. Tupac and Fuller were charged with first-degree sexual abuse, sodomy, and illegal possession of a firearm. (Police found two guns in the hotel room.) Haitian Jack's case was separated, and he later pleaded guilty to lesser charges. Tupac's trial began in November 1994.

RICHARD DEVITT (juror in Tupac's sexual-abuse case): I lived in Manhattan for nearly twenty years, ending in 2002. This was one of a number of times that I was called to jury duty. A reminder of the way New York state law works: The jurors all had to be from the same county in which the crime occurred. Manhattan is its own county, so everyone on the jury was a Manhattanite.

There were two older women on the jury. One of them, this older Jewish lady, was really *non compos mentis*. She was really not fit to be a juror. She didn't remember things. She wanted to get out of New York and get to her condo in Florida. That's all she cared about—"Can we just vote on this now?" She would vote guilty or not guilty depending on the majority. She didn't care if he was acquitted or not, or on what charge. There was a younger Jewish lady who was a nice lady, who I became somewhat friendly with during the trial, who was sitting right next to her, who turned to me at several points and said, "You know, she's senile. She doesn't know what's going on here."

The other older lady was much more of a force to be reckoned with. I remember during the jury selection, boy, she really wanted to be on this jury. You could just tell that she wanted to give all the right answers. I had a number of conversations with her over the course of the long period, because we were sequestered. She positioned herself once we got into the jury room at the head of the table, this lady, and she really tried to preside over things even though she was not the jury foreman.

She worked, as I recall, in a naval-engineering company in Manhattan. She lived in Tudor City, an upper-middle-class apartment complex, right across from the United Nations. She was retired. She had never been married. She was a devout, extreme, right-wing Roman Catholic. She was very religious, very conservative, no experience with relations with

"This guy's got the

PAGE 97: BOLIVAR ARELLANO/*NEW YORK POST*/GETTY IMAGES

the opposite sex. Her social knowledge seemed to have been frozen in 1943.

Here was her position on the whole thing: This poor, poor girl. He was her ideal. He was her star. He was her guiding light that she looked up to and she respected and she fully expected him to marry her, and this is how he betrayed her. That was her entire theory of the case, and she never let go of that theory. She was the one who kept us in there forever. Had it not been for her, we would have acquitted on all counts. She was the reason we deliberated for so long. She would not back down an inch; she wouldn't concede a single point.

A younger woman was trying to tell her people do have sex outside of marriage and they even have casual sex without intending to get married. She didn't buy that. This was too nice of a girl for that kind of thing. That's how she would frame it; this was not that kind of a girl. You could see how well-dressed this girl was, and she worked at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and she was well presented, and she was very soft-spoken, and she's not the kind of girl that would have sex unless she was absolutely determined that she was going to be marrying this guy, and that's what he must have led her to believe. She was starstruck.

So that was her.

There was another guy there who was a pastor. I don't know if he was Black, Hispanic, or Black-Hispanic. He was my roommate during the sequester. But he and I didn't really speak all that much because he was a very soft-spoken gentleman. He was probably in his late thirties. Very nice man. He had a congregation somewhere uptown. I don't remember where.

He was very deliberate. I would say very fair-minded. He would ask questions, but they were always pointed questions. What surprised me was, in the end, whenever we took a vote, he was always voting in Tupac's favor. When we first introduced ourselves to each other and got to know each other, I thought, *This guy, he's religious. He's from a conservative Protestant sect. He is probably going to be really against this kind of out-of-wedlock thing, and he's probably judgmental of hip-hop and thug life and all of that.* He may have been all those things, but he stuck to the facts all the time.

There was a little NYU girl. She was a white girl. She was twenty-one, shy but very sweet. She thought the whole thing was ridiculous, that Tupac was on trial for this. "The girl knew what she was doing, and Tupac didn't do anything to her, regardless of what happened with the other guys in the room," she said. The girl never claimed at the time that the manager even touched her. She was like, "What are we trying here?" That was her opinion.

There was a Black woman who was in her late twenties. She vociferously stood up for Tupac. She had many arguments with the older woman sat at the head of the table.

CHARISSE JONES: You live the moment now and it's hard to believe, in a way. Everything was one way, and then it changed. Post-change you're like, *How was it ever like that?* That was *soooo* far before Me Too. It was so far before the reckoning for R. Kelly and these other folks, and the reckoning for R. Kelly took a long time. But at the time, for many, it wasn't even in your rearview mirror that you should maybe look at it and condemn what this guy had been accused of doing.

RICHARD DEVITT: I have to remark upon the fact that times have changed so much, with the Me Too movement and everything, that today, the event that night would be seen as egregious. We've come a long way from when I was a kid, with regards to women and charges of rape. This was the nineties—a long ways from when I was a kid, but we weren't where we are today. The question of consent was very much on people's minds at the time.

I was not personally very impressed with Tupac's attorney. He mainly did the down and dirty thing that defense attorneys do in a rape case. It turned out that there was an event that happened at Nell's, down the street from where I lived, on Fourteenth Street. [Jackson] had oral sex with Tupac, and Tupac's attorney made her go through what happened between them on the dance floor in very graphic detail. He had her go through that step by step.

"He whispered in your ear, 'Would you like to do this?' and what did you say?"

"I said, 'Yes.'"

"Then what happened?"

"He put his hand on my shoulder and I knelt down in front of him," or along those lines.

"And then what happened?"

"He took out his penis." Her voice got quiet.

"And then what happened?"

"I put my mouth on it."

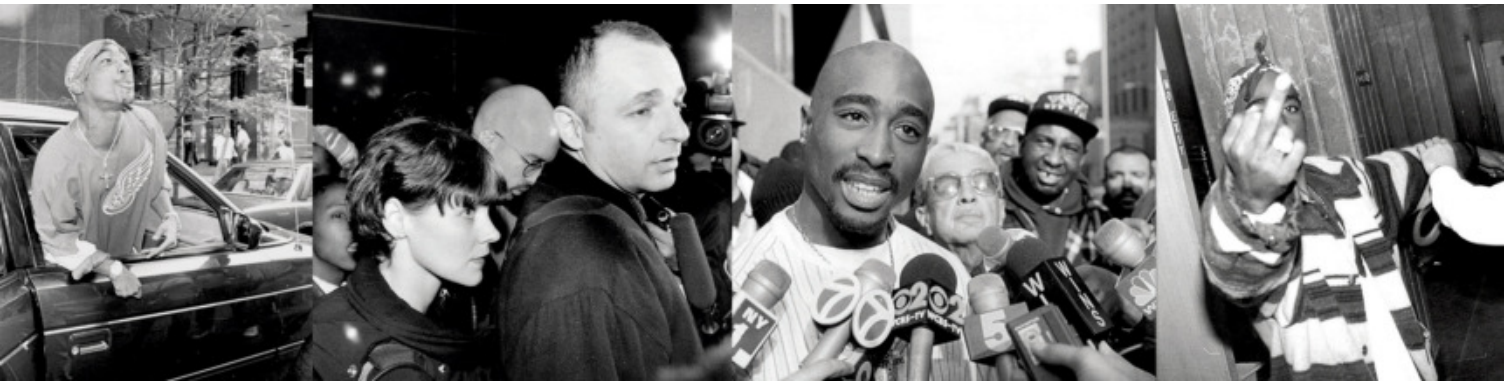
"And then what? Did you like it?"

And she said, "Yes."

If you've ever been in a courtroom, you may know that the court reporter has no reason to speak up. In this case, she did. I think it was a statement on her part. When he asked her, "Did you like it?" and the girl said, "Yes," the court reporter said, "I'm sorry, Your Honor, I didn't catch that. Would you have the witness repeat it, please?" And she made her repeat that. The fact that the court reporter did that made quite an impression. It made an impression in the jury room later on, and it made an impression on me at the time.

JUSTIN TINSLEY: Obviously, our conversations around rape and sexual assault are night-and-day different compared with what they were in 1993 and 1994. If you go back and read the articles from that time, there were a lot of people, men and women, who sided with Tupac. Even back then, to the people who were really astute and aware of Tupac, he felt like so much more than a rapper. He felt like a ghetto Lazarus to a lot of people. The thought of being remembered as a rapist deeply

world in his hands, but he's juggling it. What's going to happen?"



From left: Tupac's mug shot. Tupac spits at photographers, July 1994. Two of the jurors in Tupac's trial, including Richard Devitt at right. Tupac talks to the press during a break in the trial. Tupac gestures to camerapeople at a bail hearing in December 1993.

FROM LEFT: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES. BOLIVAR ARELLANO/*NEW YORK POST*/GETTY IMAGES. W. A. FUNCHES JR./*NEW YORK POST*/GETTY IMAGES. DON HALASY/*NEW YORK POST*/GETTY IMAGES. MICHAEL NORCIA/*NEW YORK POST* ARCHIVES.

haunted him. In the Ed Gordon interview [on BET], he says, "I can't leave until people actually know that I am not guilty of this."

Even still, something happened in that hotel room. Something clearly happened. In the *Vibe* interview [from 1995], he said, "Even though I'm innocent of the charge they gave me, I'm not innocent in terms of the way I was acting. I don't know if she was with these niggas or if she's mad at me for not protecting her, but I feel ashamed because I wanted to be accepted. I didn't want no harm done to me. I didn't say anything."

So there is this level of responsibility there. Regardless of what anyone believes did or did not happen that night, Tupac said it himself: He didn't do enough to stop it. At best, he looked the other way. Those aren't my words. Those aren't your words. These are his exact words.

When we think about this case, we've got to look at all entry points, all levels of complexities, because it's not just "Did he do this?" Maybe he didn't. But in his own words, he was complicit in what happened. Tupac feared for himself and protected himself over protecting Ayanna Jackson.

Over the course of 1994, Tupac is telling basically anyone who will listen, "I'm innocent. I did not do this." Whether it's on *Arsenio Hall*, whether it's Ed Gordon, whether it's outside the courtroom the day before he's shot at Quad. November 18 leads to Quad; he's calling out all these street dudes in the media, calling out all the hangers-on. He's like, *All these guys were in the room when this incident happened; why am I the only one on trial?* His angst with that is understandable. But, again, you're in that underworld. There are going to be consequences.

On November 30, 1994, while recording verses for a Ron G mixtape, Tupac received a message on his pager from the manager Jimmy Henchman, who years later would be convicted of running a massive drug operation and conspiracy to commit murder. Tupac had agreed to do a verse for Henchman's client Little Shawn at Quad Studios in Manhattan. When Tupac arrived in the lobby, he was robbed at gunpoint. He resisted and was shot five times. Sean "Puffy" Combs and the Notorious B.I.G. were both upstairs in the studio working on an album for Biggie's group Junior M.A.F.I.A.; Tupac believed Puffy and Biggie to be among those responsible. Only a few hours after surgery, fearing further attacks, Tupac checked out of Bellevue Hospital Center. Two days later, he received the jury's verdict.

RICHARD DEVITT: Even the older woman who really wanted to crucify Tupac, regardless of whatever he may or may not have done, she even dismissed the gun charges immediately. When we first went into the jury room, the gun charges were dismissed in minutes. The gun that they entered as evidence was a different-colored gun. That and various other details about the gun, which I no longer recall, made us immediately discount those gun charges. We all felt, even the most conservative, that the guns had been planted there by the cops. Everybody believed that.

The cops who testified, frankly, I didn't believe a word of what they said. I don't think any of the jury did either. They just didn't come across as believable, and it was felt that they had an ax to grind. I do recall that they admitted to the fact that they were basically stalking Tupac. There were a number of them around the hotel. They were out to get Tupac, and it was obvious. He was in town to make a music video, and they hounded him all over town. Because eventually, when he was shot in the middle of the whole thing, they were at his side thirty seconds after he was shot. It was just phenomenal. The feeling at the time was that he was shot by one of the cops. That wasn't discussed in the jury room, but I remember people speculating afterward. We didn't feel that the cops were being fair to him at all.

JUSTIN TINSLEY: Of course Tupac is gonna be the one to catch the brunt of everything. He's Tupac Shakur. He'd just shot at two off-duty police officers. The federal government knows who he is and hates him. At some point they're gonna be waiting on you to slip up.

RICHARD DEVITT: We were sequestered in a hotel, a really shabby place. The city of New York didn't have a lot of money. It was a roach-infested place, like a Holiday Inn, outside Kennedy Airport. We were bused there in a police van with our armed guards the entire time back and forth. We actually ate at the place with the guards standing around the table. We all had to be at one big table. They made sure that when we walked in, there were guards standing in front of the newsstand. We didn't look at any newspapers. The TVs were taken out of our rooms. So we were incommunicado. We had no idea whatsoever what happened. So the next day after it happened and they came into the courtroom—as always, when we would come into the courtroom, the jury was the last to arrive—we came in and right away, we noticed that Tupac was not there.

So the judge turns to us and he says, "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury"—and I'm paraphrasing—"I would like to instruct you that the defendant will be arriving shortly and you are to make no inferences whatsoever about his appearance. You are not to discuss his appearance afterward when you deliberate. His appearance today has nothing to do with the events that occurred during what he's accused of." Then they wheeled Tupac in in a wheelchair. I was like, *Whoa, what happened here?* We glanced at one another. I remember being incredibly curious as to what went on. But it didn't have any effect on our deliberations. Nobody speculated on it in the jury room. Nobody called attention to it.

We—with the exception of the Catholic lady and her old-lady friend who would sometimes join her—repeatedly voted to acquit on all the charges because it was felt that Tupac wasn't even in the room when the abuse occurred. Whether somebody else or the rest of them gang-raped or not is irrelevant to this case.

So we thought Tupac was definitely not guilty of anything at all. We were very close to saying hung jury. Hour after hour after hour; you have no idea how tedious it was. We actually sent a note out at one point that said, We're having difficulty coming to a decision, Your Honor. We wanted to know about how a hung jury would work. He sent a note back that said keep going. After that, we went a whole other day with this woman.

I said, "This is ridiculous. This is not going anywhere. We cannot make a decision here. Let's just say a hung jury."

A lot of people threw up their hands and said, "All right."

The old lady said, "Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, does this mean he's going to go free?! Is that what you people want? He's got 'Thug Life' written on his stomach. Is that what you want? Somebody like that roaming the streets?"

She gave this nearly hysterical speech about how there'll be other women who are victimized and the message we were sending to young people. She was virtually arguing that whether this guy is guilty or not guilty, the details of this case are virtually irrelevant. Because it's the message that you're going to be sending that's the key. She said, "I will not allow you to say this is a hung jury."

"We didn't feel that the

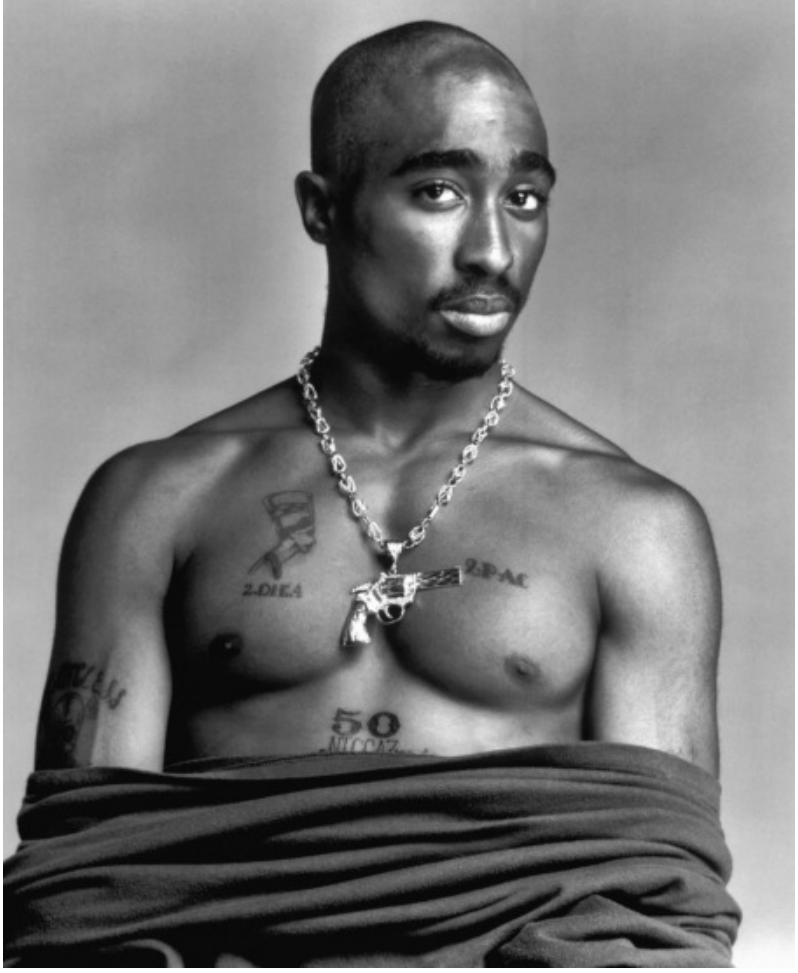
We were like, "Listen, we're just not going to go any further, okay?"

She said, "There's the fourth-degree thing. You have to admit that something did happen to this girl, right?"

Our knowledge of fourth-degree sexual assault was that if you put your hands on somebody in a bar or something like that, that's fourth-degree sexual assault. People went around the table and said things like, "Well, how much time will he get for a conviction like that?" I think we may have even sent a note out to the judge asking about that. The answer came back that he couldn't talk to us about the sentencing or the sentencing potential. That's irrelevant. You're to judge the facts of the case and the facts only.

The feeling among the majority of people was that *Well, this is a pretty minor charge. Did he really get four years for that?*

Though jurors considered an even lesser charge, Tupac was ultimately convicted of first-degree sexual abuse and sentenced to one and a half to four and a half years in prison. During the sentencing, Justice Daniel P. Fitzgerald said, "This was an act of brutal violence against a helpless woman." Addressing the judge, Tupac said, "I mean this with no disrespect, Judge—you never paid attention to me. You never looked in my eyes. You never used the wisdom of Solomon. I always felt you had something against me."



ELI REED/MAGNUM IMAGES

cops were being fair to him at all."

RICHARD DEVITT: As the judge was wrapping up, he turned to the jury, and he said, "There's no law preventing you from speaking to the press, but I would like to tell you that it's not a very pleasant experience. You may find that there's personal repercussions from having that kind of visibility. So, if you wish, I would advise you to leave the courtroom by one of the side doors so you don't encounter the press who are waiting outside. You've been sequestered, so you don't realize that there will be TV cameras and print reporters and a lot of press there."

Most of the jury went out one side door and avoided the press. This NYU girl and I, I don't know why, but we chose the other side. When we came out the door, *boom,* there we were, just me and her in front of this whole scrum of reporters and cameras and lights.

She was scared and she put her arm around my waist. One of the reporters said, "Is this a sequestered-jury love story like we had in the Bernie Goetz trial?"

I said, "No, no, no, no, no. We're just friends."

So I did most of the talking, and she just kept her arm around my waist and she was shivering, she was so scared, but it was cold, too.

The reporter for MTV was right in the middle of the scrum in the front. He went down on one knee and held out his microphone to me. I was sort of aiming my comments at him because he was the one right in front of my face. First thing he asked me was: "There were two older women on this jury. Do you feel that two older people were really competent to understand the music and the culture behind hip-hop?"

I, perhaps suffering from Stockholm syndrome myself, was far too generous to these two old ladies. I did not want to throw a wrench into the works and get myself in trouble by saying one of them was completely senile and had no idea what was going on most of the time and the other one was a right-wing revolutionary who wanted to lock up every Black male that she could get her hands on. I was far too generous. I said, "Well, you know, there were two older women here, but remember, this is Manhattan. They're not completely unsophisticated. They know a little bit more about the world." That was wrong. I don't know why I said that. Maybe because I was trying to protect them or protect the jury.

In retrospect, would I have said anything different? Probably not, because of the implications. It might have ended up in a mistrial had I said, "Listen, one of them was senile; the other one wanted to crucify Tupac no matter what." I just didn't think that was the appropriate thing to say, even though it was the truth.

I said that, and unbeknownst to me, I was on every local-news broadcast that night, and I was on *MTV News* with Kurt Loder. My brother lives in Pennsylvania. He was shaving the next morning, and he said he had on MTV and all of a sudden, he said, "I heard your voice from the other room."

CHARISSE JONES: I think that it was a very racialized paradigm. I think that because he was hated by cops, because he was this fledgling rap icon becoming a movie star, there was a protectiveness around him, which obviously does a great disservice to the woman who was abused. I think there's been a real awakening since then with R. Kelly and all of that, but at that time, I feel that Black women felt that they had to be loyal to this young brother. Even though they were, in doing that, denying the humanity and the emotion that this young woman had to be going through, having experienced this terrible assault. I got the sense that people were kind of Team Tupac, especially because he was a young Black man who was being vilified by some in the white community.

RICHARD DEVITT: As soon as I got back to work, I hadn't even gotten my coat off when three Black women walked into my office and shut the door behind them. They were furious at the girl. My own secretary, Michelle, was from Queens. She said, "What the hell is wrong with that girl? She walks into a room, there's five men there, and there was a gun on the table. Why the hell didn't she just turn around and walk out of there?" They were vehemently in support of Tupac, and they were mad at me for convicting him. I said, "Listen, I wanted to acquit on all charges. Most of the people in the room did. There were a couple of people there that kept us there forever. So that's what we ended up with." Still, the MTV reporter had asked if the verdict was a compromise, and he was right. It was a compromise.

Tupac and Fuller were convicted of first-degree sexual abuse, but they were acquitted of weapons and sodomy charges. Haitian Jack was later deported to Haiti after an unrelated conviction. Tupac's conviction changed not only his trajectory but the trajectory of a still-nascent genre. It was the first domino in a series leading to both a moratorium for West Coast rap and the wider genre's commercial explosion. But for Tupac specifically, it put an increasingly paranoid rapper in the clutches of a man who encouraged his worst impulses, Suge Knight, beginning what may have been an inevitable demise. The confluence of circumstances—his sentencing, the Quad shooting, releasing the album that made him a star as he served time in maximum-security prison—led to him signing with the volatile label Death Row Records, kicking off a combustible two-year stretch that subsequently coronated two coastal kings in Tupac and Biggie, pitted their camps against each other in a violent feud, and eventually left both men dead and martyred. The hip-hop culture that remained in the wake of all the bloodshed would take years to fully recover.

ADAPTED FROM THE FORTHCOMING BOOK *CHANGES: AN ORAL HISTORY OF TUPAC SHAKUR,* BY SHELDON PEARCE, TO BE PUBLISHED BY SIMON & SCHUSTER, INC. PRINTED BY PERMISSION. COPYRIGHT © 2021 BY SHELDON PEARCE.

DADDY BALL

(continued from page 91)

$400 for Jack's travel baseball.

I asked about the Ponzi scheme, and Reardon was open about it. His good friend Kenny had recruited him, and they were sure they'd made their big break. They invested millions of dollars of family money before realizing they themselves had been duped. The convictions still haunted their professional lives.

"How did you know Kenny?" I asked.

"How?" Reardon asked. His face went red. "I was engaged to his sister."

When she was diagnosed with cancer, Reardon gave up his whole life to care for her. "The worst part was after the third year," he said. "They gave her the all clear that she was good." The cancer came back soon after. She died in 1991. She was twenty-four.

We ordered lunch, but Reardon barely touched his sandwich. He was suddenly in an expansive mood. You're not yourself when your son is on the field, he said. Something takes over your brain.

"Do you have kids?" he asked.

My first child was due in a month, I told him.

"So this is what's gonna happen. You're gonna have a kid. And you're gonna be like, 'Oh, man, this kid's gonna be president. This kid's gonna be on the Yankees. This kid's gonna be, you know, whatever he wants to be.' And then it's like, 'Well, he's not gonna be president.' "

Reardon smiled. "I've kinda been lucky that Jack has kept me going, sports-wise," he said. "So I can still keep that hope alive."

Reardon and I said goodbye in the parking lot. The sun was setting, and I sped home to my unborn child. Across the median, fathers rushed past me into the Long Island suburbs. Amazon packages had landed on their doorsteps that afternoon containing bats, balls, wristbands, cleats, eye black, glove oil, and various adhesives to put broken things back together.

Reardon had lost someone he loved, and Sanfilippo wanted to love someone he'd lost. Sanfilippo's life had not started as he deserved, and Reardon's was not going as he'd hoped. Baseball Heaven wasn't about ego, and it certainly wasn't about baseball. It was a time machine, a black hole, a one-shot portal to pasts and futures that needed fixing.

But Sanfilippo and Reardon had ruined it for themselves and each other. And so they could not leave. Not yet.

The sun has set over the Long Island Expressway. The fans are gone, and the gate is closed. The grass that is always green has turned blue. And Sanfilippo and Reardon are in opposing dugouts, disappearing in twilight. They wait for what we all wait for: to suddenly be standing in the batter's box ourselves. We're ten years old and knobby kneed, behind in the count, when the man we will become stands up in his seat, cups his hands, and shouts that he loves us.

NIGHTMARE ON MAIN STREET

(continued from page 26)

All of these films over the past few months were a buildup toward what I knew, deep down, had been my endgame all along. You see, I write about movies for a living—they aren't just an idle pastime to me. They're something deeper. They're not only a huge piece of who I am, but also a lens through which I view the world beyond the confines of a darkened theater. I believe they connect us and unite us in a way few other things can. What I really wanted to experience with my boys was sitting down and watching the greatest movie of all time together—the movie that once scared me away from both the beach and the bathroom at their age, the movie that elevated joy-buzzer B-movie schlock into capital-A Art, the movie that I have watched more than any other and am utterly powerless to click past anytime I cross paths with it on cable, especially if it happens to be during Quint's blood-curdling U. S. S. *Indianapolis* speech—*Jaws*.

Since the day they were born seven years ago, I'd been looking forward to the time that we could share this rite of passage. A communion between a father and his sons, a passing down of my favorite film. It would be our version of playing catch in *Field of Dreams*. We would face our fears together, and we would come out the other side, shaken but stronger. It would start them down that long and often treacherous path from boyhood to becoming men. *Jaws* would be our shared trial, our bond . . . *our thing*.

AT LEAST, THAT WAS THE IDEA. THE TRUTH is, when the time came to put the film on, I chickened out. Or smartened up. I'd grabbed my well-worn *Jaws* DVD and loaded it. As it slid in, scenes from the movie began to unspool in my head. I thought of the opening, when the skinny-dipper Chrissie screams as she's thrashed back and forth until her final gulps turn to silence. I thought of the moment little Alex Kintner is chomped in half while paddling on a kiddie raft, triggering geysers of arterial spray like some unbearable Bellagio fountain. I thought of Quint kicking and screaming as the great white swallows him whole on the aft deck of the *Orca* . . . and I couldn't do it.

For the next few nights, I wondered whether I'd caved because I didn't want to be seen as a bad dad. But I don't think that's it. I think it's because, to me at least, they're still sweet little boys. My sweet little boys. I don't want to overshelter them—but I'm not ready to inspire more 3:00 A.M. nightmares, either. Maybe I'll sound out my Zoom buddies next week and see what they think. For now, I'm drawing the line here. We have plenty of time to find the *right* time. And then we'll have all the time in the world to joke about needing a bigger boat.

Chris Nashawaty is a film writer and critic and the author of the book Caddyshack: The Making of a Hollywood Cinderella Story.

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The Airport Bar

IN THIS ISSUE, we've celebrated twenty-seven places that are comfortable, cozy, and calming, with crafty cocktails, eclectic wine lists, deft bartenders, and innovative snacks that keep you coming back. If that's what you're looking for, go to any one of those. But what about when you want . . . exactly zero of those things? What about when you wanna go where nobody knows your name?

For this, we endorse the airport bar. Every single one of them. We cannot narrow it down to just one, because we cannot tell them apart—and that's the point. We are thirsty for a drink in every airport bar we've ever visited, and all of the ones we haven't. After more than a year in which air travel has been on hold, a stool that's been bolted to the floor underneath a departures screen feels as exotic as any Greek island. The airport bar suggests motion, possibility, adventure. Dammit, we want those things back.

There are no locals at the airport bar, no old Jimmy who's been slinging their drinks since the seventies and knows their secrets. There is only you, bobbing in a sea of faces that were completely different an hour ago and will be completely different an hour from now. There is only a bartender working an hourly rate, plus tips, for some gruesome food-service conglomerate. She has one question for you, and the answer is yes: Let's make it a double for just three dollars more. The souls who gather at the Chili's Too in Terminal C will never be together in this configuration again. It's irresponsible not to join them!

So you will. You will ask the guy in the corporate-logo polo to move his shoulder bag so you can scooch in. You will have a thirteen-dollar pour of grocery-store wine, in a sturdy wedding-venue glass, served to you at the temperature of a bisque. You will peruse that laminated menu, and you will go for those potato-chip nachos—who are you kidding? You will hear "Absolutely (Story of a Girl)" by Nine Days, and you will know contentment.

Maybe you've just said goodbye to a parent or a dog. Possibly you're antsy for what awaits you on a beach or at a corporate retreat. Perhaps a best man's speech is in your future. Almost certainly you've been in a security line behind an adult who is just now learning the rules about liquids. In other words, you're feeling emotionally suggestible. At this moment, the airport bar becomes everyone's local.

As in international waters, our laws do not apply at the airport bar, and we refer specifically to the laws that govern the appropriate times to drink. We have been in airports at all hours—noon and midnight, 6:00 P.M. and 6:00 A.M., you know the hours—and we have never not seen at least one person nursing a beer. Yet the sight is never pathetic. It's 5:00 P.M. on someone's internal clock, and all judgments are in the cargo hold, where they belong.

The airport bar is at its most magical when storm systems disrupt flight plans, when delays pile on top of delays and the realization that you're stranded hits you harder than that Absolut Peppar Bloody Mary. Stay put and watch your fellow travelers get day drunk. Thrill as their "Hey, bartender" move evolves from a polite wave to a full-on modern dance. Or just talk. Strangers become friends in those lonely, well-lit hours, then they board their respective planes and become strangers again forever. Nobody promises to keep in touch. There is beauty in that.

In one such travel boondoggle, during a winter storm in the Before Times, we noticed the woman next to us sneaking french fries off our burger combo plate. Clearly caught and obviously overserved, she explained, "I'm the kind of girl who likes to steal people's fries." In the moment, we simply let it happen and got back to the book we were pretending to read. But perhaps she was trying on a new identity for the day. Maybe she had one hour left before she had to go back to her old routine and she decided to fill that time being the kind of girl who likes to steal people's fries. Maybe in that moment, she was truly happy.

Our destination can wait. Before we get there, won't you meet us at the airport bar? We know someone who can make it a double for just three dollars more.

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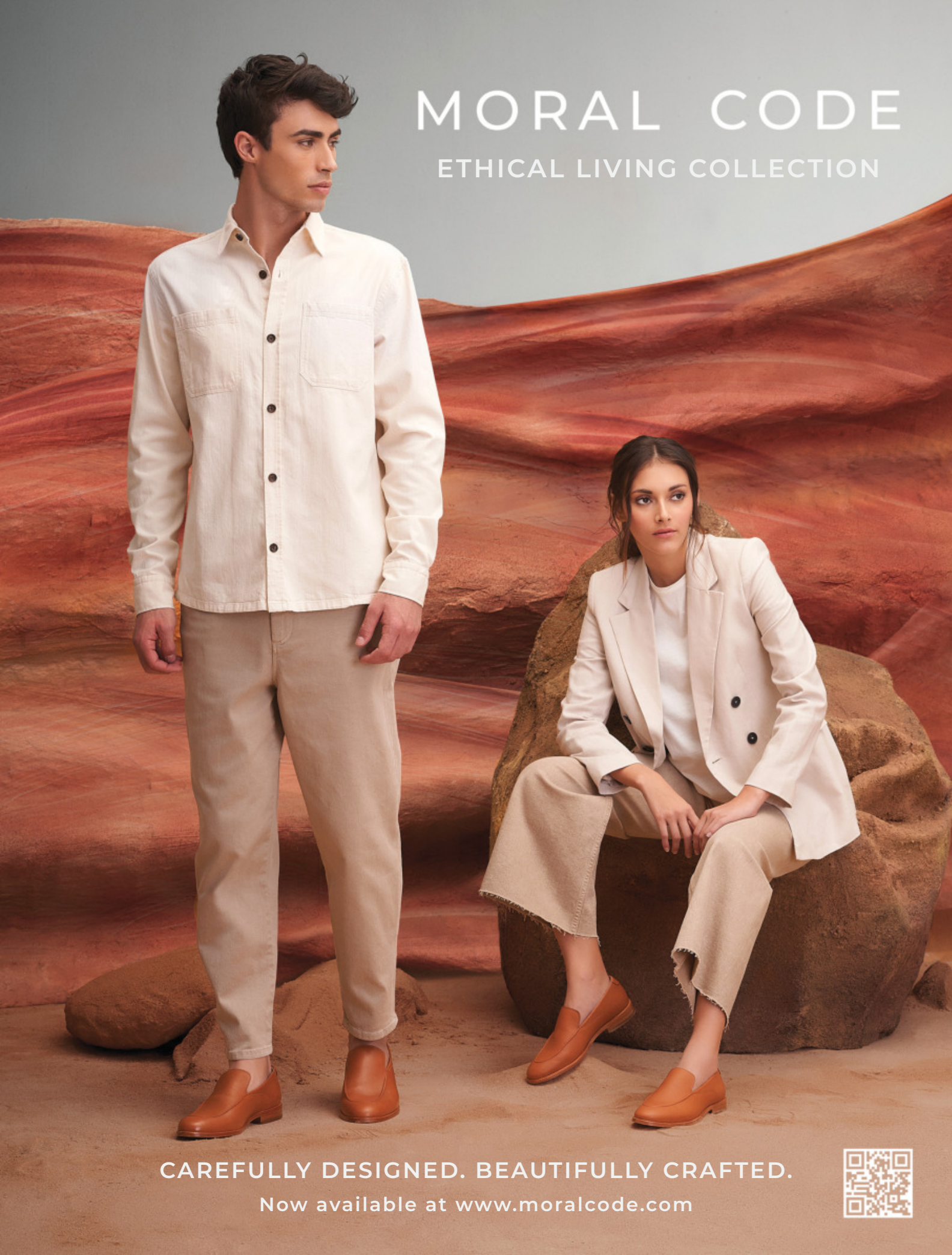
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TUDOR ® BORN TO DARE AND BLACK BAY FIFTY-EIGHT ARE ® TRADEMARKS.